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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

NICOLE BROSSARD AND ROBERT KROETSCH:
AESTHETICS & POETIC PROJECTS

by

JOANN M. BLAIS

A THESIS

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for S.
and the cat

ABSTRACT

Nicole Brossard and Robert Kroetsch are both influential contemporary writers whose work manifests a crisis on what Rilke might have called the scaffoldings of consciousness. And although this crisis may be seen as merely an extravagantly formal one, its epicentre is to be found in a volatile nucleus of problems which are finally ontological and cosmologic in nature: problems of naming and of relation, of order and of meaning, of language and being in a world that is at once immanent, absurd, and full of ancient rhetoric.

The thesis itself falls into four parts. After situating Brossard and Kroetsch in their respective literary traditions, two chapters are devoted to the examination of some of the most important elements of their prose aesthetics and what Umberto Eco in L'Oeuvre ouverte terms la poétique (the poetic intention or poetic project of an individual as distinct from actual literary production) as they are revealed through essays, reviews, interviews and other critical writings. In the chapter on Brossard concepts dealt with include: the act of writing, the nature and function of fiction in relation to the construction of reality, the self, female being, the void, and possible literary strategies to exploit fissures in language and frames of reference in order to induce modifications in human perception--the use of disjunctive syntax, infra-language, deconstructed narratives, and other techniques borrowed from Dada and the surrealists. Some of the issues treated in the chapter on

Robert Kroetsch are: the unconcluded self, the artist as trickster, "mandarin language", the uninvention of the world and other deconstructionist projects, atopia, and, finally, the ramifications of his comic vision. The final chapter explores the common project of both these writers--the uninvention of the world--in a rather more existential sense, probing the different movement of imagination expressed in their discourse in order to underscore the crucial differences in their respective projects, their very different movement of mind.

The movement of the thesis is a rather complex one of synthesis, differential analysis, and speculation. Because it shadows the evolution of two practising writers, this thesis is not an anatomy, but a necessarily tentative study with its own peculiar and inalienable blindness, one offered less as a definitive statement than as a working paper that hopes to stimulate critical reflection about the implications of contemporary aesthetics.

The primary collections of texts used in the thesis are the following: The Crow Journals (1980), Labyrinths of Voice: Conversations with Robert Kroetsch (1982), the special issue of Open Letter (Spring 1983) for Kroetsch; Amantes (1980), Journal intime (1984), Double Impression: poèmes et textes 1967-1984 (1984) for Brossard.

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For I tell you the earth
itself is a mystery
which we penetrate constantly
and our people a holy mystery
beyond refusal

And the horrors of the mind
are the horrors of
what we allow to be done
and the grace of the soul
is what we determine shall be
made truly among us. Amen.

Pat Lowther--"Chacabuco, The Pit"

(If the doors of perception were
cleansed, everything would appear
to man as it is, infinite.)

William Blake--"The Marriage of
Heaven and Hell"

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

It has been said that English Canada and French Canada are like two deaf opera singers that stand together on the same stage singing different arias.[1] For a comparatist, the incongruity of that absurdist image of cultural incompatibility presently turns to poignancy as the field of literary relations turns up contrapuntal themes, figures and movements that collapse repeatedly into dissonance and alienation. Most literary historians attribute that dissonance to the fact that the anglophone and the francophone literatures grew out of entirely different literary traditions, but there is another reason that is also historical in origin; since their inception, the relationship between politics, ethics and aesthetics has nearly always been diametrically opposed in the two traditions.

In contrast to the unpolarized, largely apolitical development of literature in English Canada (and perhaps because of its connections to a tradition in which radical political and artistic agendas have been concomitant from the French Revolution through to Hugo and Breton), literary evolution in Quebec has almost invariably proceeded by means of a cycle in which a long quiescence alternates with the violent convulsions of a small group of intelligentsia. The passive estrangement normally characterizing the relations between the secular intelligentsia and the people gives way to an intense but unstable alliance which ends either in a conceptual abortion or in the tidal

wave of a modified collective vision. Consequently, literary and cultural historians have written histories that deal less in terms of individuals than in terms of generations, movements, schools, ideologies, backlashes and crucifixions.[2]

Historians of English-Canadian literature, on the other hand, would be hard pressed to find movements or individual writers whose literary practice parallels that of the writers of Parti Pris or l'Hexagone, or who leave behind documents like the Refus global. Dorothy Livesay, F. R. Scott and other writers of the 1930s who inclined towards the various brands of Marxism offer perhaps the only substantial instance where a group of anglophone writers attempted to establish a fine balance between a personal, lyrical poetry and a public poetry of social commitment.

A final difference plaguing the comparative study of English-Canadian and Quebecois texts is the problem of defining modernity--not only when and why it occurs at a given moment in each tradition, but also that of extracting a set of common denominators that permits a comparison of modernities largely derived from different traditions to be meaningful.[3] But those comparisons can be made: in the prose writings of Nicole Brossard and Robert Kroetsch one can see the continuation of certain elements of modernism, and the fusion of issues that Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane identity as separate concerns of modernist poetry and modernist prose. In Modernism: 1890-1930 they write:

> If modern poetry raises particularly sharply the question of the relationship between subject and object, poet and world, writer and language, then the novel, because of its prose character, especially raises problems in the representation of reality and logical sequential structure.

> The Modernist novel has shown, perhaps, four great preoccupations: with the complexities of its own form, with the representation of inward states of consciousness, with a sense of nihilistic disorder behind the ordered surface of life and reality, and with the freeing of narrative art from the determination of an onerous plot. In all of these areas what is being questioned is linear narrative, logical and progressive order, the establishing of a stable surface of reality. . . .[4]

With two qualifications, this passage serves as an overview of the central concerns engaging the aesthetic of both writers, and establishes a common ground for comparative study.[5] The first is that with these writers the representation of the processes and states of consciousness has been removed from the level of the actant to those of the narrator and the implied or real author involved in the processes of writing or narrating; the second, that form, obliged to function for decades as a dyke against the overwhelming formlessness of experiential reality, has given way to the deconstructionist trends which explore the semantic intricacies of disseminated or exploded form.

Many critics would be inclined to label this common ground postmodernism. The term is a tempting one, but it is not yet clearly defined enough to make the concept especially helpful in transtraditional studies. Moreover, the very notion of Modernism is undergoing critical revision and becoming blurred; the official image of Modernism and its pantheon of iconic high moderns is increasingly at odds with the anarchic reality of those who might be called the "sleeping moderns", the neglected or masked writers with whom postmoderns are still learning to be contemporaries: Stein, the late H.D., the later, "cybernetic" Joyce.[6]

Some final notes: Nicole Brossard and Robert Kroetsch are

prolific writers of poetry as well as prose, and so we find in their discourse the peculiar richness and texture of minds engaged simultaneously in the problems of poetry and prose. And because they both subscribe to the poststructural notion of generic "writing" rather than to the idea of genre per se, their aesthetics and poetics cast a very wide (and some would say audacious) net. One of the most notorious features of innovative writing of this century has been the abysmal difference between programmatic poetic projects and the actual literary practice, the end-product. This difference has often been used to discredit and deny the legitimacy and validity of those projects which insist upon changes in aesthetic and sociocultural paradigms. Literary historians must recognize that "project" and "end-product" are two distinct discourses which are at once autonomous and interdependent. They must begin to write histories and perform anatomies that will refine our perception of the avant-garde and allow us to recognize the fundamental projects and obsessions of our century.

The secondary materials produced by Nicole Brossard and Robert Kroetsch would be worthy of study from the perspective of literary history alone. The examination of their aesthetic and their critical writing is an entrée, a door opening onto the place where they conduct discourses that are at once public and private discourses. Through their writing they are drawing continental literary and linguistic theory into the arena of critical discussion and common creative practice. Through their assimilation of poststructural and deconstructive thought, they are establishing a ground for further studies in Canadian and Quebecois literary relations, though they both remain relatively unknown outside their spheres of influence at the

present time.[7]

The appearance of Paul-Emile Borduas' Refus global in a private bookstore in Montreal early in August of 1947 signaled the public inauguration of modernity in Quebec.[8] The manifesto, collected with eight texts written by other Automatistes and countersigned by most of the members of the Automatiste nucleus, threw the sclerotic and inbred province directly into the currents and the crises of an increasingly polarized European consciousness: the "strange flowers" of postwar culture had begun to bloom on the other side of the Atlantic.[9] Even today, the surrealist-inspired document remains breathtaking in its aggressive and radical denunciation of European civilization and its ability to combine an apocalyptic sensibility with an outrageous sense of hope. After a violent opening attack on French-Canadian society, which he describes as small, fearful, priest-ridden, and "tenu à l'écart de l'évolution universelle de la pensée pleine de risques et de dangers" (11), Borduas asserts the death of that past and the reality of an unbounded present and future. In a highly polemical style culled from Futurist manifestos and French surrealist texts, he writes:

> Les frontières de nos rêves ne sont plus les mêmes.
> Des vertiges nous prennent à la tombée des
> oripeaux d'horizons naguère surchargés. La honte
> du servage sans espoir fait place à la fierté d'une
> liberté possible à conquérir de haute lutte. . . .
> Le règne de la peur multiforme est terminé.
> Dans le fol espoir d'en effacer le souvenir je les
> énumère:
> peur des préjugés--peur de l'opinion publique--des
> persécutions--de la réprobation générale
> peur d'être seul sans Dieu et la société qui isole
> très infailliblement

peur de soi--de son frère--de la pauvreté
peur de l'ordre établi--de la ridicule justice
peur des relations neuves
peur du surrationnel
peur des nécessités
peur des écluses grandes ouvertes sur la foi en l'homme--en la société future
peur de toutes les formes susceptibles de déclencher un amour transformant
(Refus global, 13-14)

Along with dire predictions of the inevitable fall of a decadent Christian society, the manifesto embraces an expanded, even visionary sense of reality predicated upon magic, love, freedom, le mystère objectif, the pure psychic energy of human imagination and the irrational, the possibility of the surreal transformation of the world, and the birth of a new collective hope. In his book on Borduas, Guy Robert outlines the major tenets of the Automatistes as they emerged in the late 1940s:

1. l'automatisme montréalais tend à considérer l'homme comme

   a) un ensemble
   b) dynamique
   c) évolutif

2. l'énergie dont l'individu dispose, dans telles circonstances de civilisation, participe à une énergie vitale cosmique, qu'il est possible de libérer;

3. la source de cette énergie, que chacun porte en soi, est en quelque sorte dissimulée dans l'inconscient; il s'agit d'y être attentif, et de n'en point empêcher la manifestation;

. . . . . .

6. les moyens d'investigation des sources d'énergie inconsciente sont toujours de nature instrumentale; il s'usent, se démodent, peuvent être remplacés par des moyens plus efficaces, qui seront à leur tour abandonnés au profit de nouveaux moyens;

7. il en résulte une dynamique opératoire qui investit la

condition humaine dans une combinatoire inépuisable de schèmes de rapports avec l'univers; la sélection de ces rapports pourra sembler se faire souvent "par hasard" mais ce processus stochastique ne fait que recourir, de fait, à l'automatisme tel qu'il a été décrit au paragraphe quatre;

8. la rencontre du champ conscient et du champ inconscient rétablit une continuité plus organique entre le corps et l'âme, entre le continuum mental, dans une dilatation globale de l'être, au plus grand bénéfice de l'ensemble humain dans son processus d'expression et du communication;

. . . . . .

(Borduas, 131-33)

Although most cultural historians have considered Automatism as primarily an offshoot of Surrealism in the visual and plastic arts (Borduas was a painter and a sculptor), it was an aesthetic movement intimately involved in experimentation in the areas of theatre, dance and poetry; the contributors to the Refus global included a poet (Claude Gauvreau), a critic-theoretician (Fernand Leduc), a psychiatrist (Bruno Cormier), and a dancer (Françoise Sullivan). Persuaded by extensive readings in Freud, Breton, Nietzsche, Marx and Lautréamont of the falseness and rigidity of the Church's incarcerating view of the world and human nature, their rejection of the Church and the idea of art as a defender of that ideology was complete. Discarding mimesis and the trap of referentiality, the Automatistes began to explore the formal and epistemological possibilities of artistic media. Through uninhibited surreal play they began to discover the artistic medium itself, pure form, and the possibility of engendering an expanded sense of the real through an artistic mode that proposed a new set of relations between human beings and the world: a surrational mode of being that continually dilated the collective sense of the real with

information retrieved from irrational areas of the psyche, the Automatiste aesthetic was totalistic: asserting the relationship between various forms of psychic energy and the creation of new forms, it came upon the link between a freed creative imagination and human evolution. It countered the black pessimism of the war years with the assurance of a difficult, but conceivable, hope in a regenerated humanity.

In his "Commentaires sur des mots contradictoires", the second text found in the Refus global, Borduas defines surrational automatic painting as "écriture plastique non préconçue. Une forme en appelle une autre jusqu'au sentiment de l'unité, ou de l'impossibilité d'aller plus loin sans destruction".[10] It was a disciplined mode of automatic composition where an acute sense of form, working with figures emerging spontaneously from the artist's psyche, metamorphosed into a totalism experienced directly in the production of a painting that was a self-contained reality. This discovery of the two-dimensionality of the canvas (pace Manet), of texture and subsequently of the idea of painting as gesture in the company of abstract expressionists in New York, paralleled and nurtured Claude Gauvreau's investigations into language. Gauvreau went beyond the controlled and lyrical surreal imagery of Alain Grandbois, discovering the autistic beauty of language and the literary text as an integral verbal surface, a self-contained, textured reality. Gauvreau referred to his poetry and his dramatic objects as "complex verbal fusions". Fascinated by phonetics, pure beauty, his language broke open into stark and arresting irrational images, then down into onomatopoeia and a disarming avant poetry that had seceded from everything but the formal beauty of phonemes and the pattern of its own internal energies. His surreal

suicide, like Borduas' self-imposed exile, was public notice of a breach in the polis; their formal revolt, their complete break with the past and passionate faith in the future, and their call for a transformed society was advance notice of a seditious phase in Quebecois culture.

In retrospect, the Automatiste movement appears to some cultural historians as the product of a conflation of phenomena. Its aesthetic was derived not only from the aggressive elements of Surrealism and other avant-garde movements, but also from the contemporaneous wartime Weltanschauung, both of which were in truth only modulations of an ongoing crisis in the European psyche that had infiltrated a sequestered colony across the Atlantic. Although conservatives were quick to claim victory when the Automatiste movement began to disintegrate soon after Borduas was forced to leave Montreal in the last months of 1948, the seeds of a modified culture had already been sown in Quebec. The Automatistes had assumed a posture not take by Quebecois artists before them, collectively challenging their society not only with a radically different view of human possibility, but also with a comprehensive aesthetic that understood the connection between innovative art forms and an expanded sense of reality. Their rejection of mimesis and the referential in favour of the exploration of spontaneously generated forms, gestures and utterances is inextricably bound up with a repudiation of consensual reality. The openness of the surrational art object to chance and elements surfacing from irrational areas of the mind is, finally, an attempt to open the artist's self to energies circulating around him/her, so that the self and the object is is making flows with that

energy rather than setting itself against it. Formal closure, the sine qua non of the traditional art object, becomes contingent. Concomitantly, subjects become plural, fluid, hallucinatory, or, as in the late black-and-white paintings of Borduas, the apparent subject--that of the medium itself--gives way and becomes a diffuse field in which the artist observes an intricate play of principles.

Both Borduas and Gauvreau were working in what Jaspers refers to as a boundary situation; that is, they were working in the interstices of consensual frames of reference, which, as I have tried to stress here, were not only artistic but ontological frames.[11] For reasons undoubtedly personal as well as artistic, Gauvreau fell through the holes in our world into psychosis and an almost opaque private language, while Borduas was able to come back with a knowledge, a gnosis that he put into his late black-and-whites. Here being, becoming and absence speak to one another, dance ritually around one another, and marry into grey; movement strives against a migratory still point, seeking a tentative, illusory domination; yet they are contained in a balance that is wise, almost holy, and never repeated, as in the hexagrams of the Book of Changes.

The Automatistes are the immediate antecedents of Nicole Brossard in a most profound and salient manner. They are important not only for the importation of surrealist thought and literary practice into Quebec, and their spirit of radical experimentation in the areas of politics and aesthetics, but also for their stubborn, sometimes strident integrity that refused to assume the fatigue of European culture and its yoke, calling instead for collective transformation and renewal. She and they are what Natalie Barney, writing

to Gertrude Stein in 1926, called "mind allies", participants in a century-long revolt.[12]

> Rompre définitivement avec toutes les habitudes de la société, se désolidariser de son esprit utilitaire. Refus d'être sciemment au-dessous de nos possibilités psychiques. Refus de fermer les yeux sur les vices, les duperies perpétrées sous le couvert du savoir, du service rendu, de la reconnaissance due. Refus d'un cantonnement dans la seule bourgade plastique, place fortifiée mais trop facile d'évitement. Refus de se taire . . . refus de la gloire, des honneurs (le premier consenti): stigmates de la nuisance, de l'inconscience, de la servilité. . . . Refus de toute INTENTION, arme néfaste de la RAISON. À bas toutes deux, au second rang!
> . . . . . .
> Au refus global nous opposons la responsabilité entière.
> (in Refus global, 20)

The initially acute strangeness of the major themes found in Brossard's prose may lead critics to the premature conclusion that her sources lie outside of Quebec, in the recently-made ground of the Nouveau roman and French feminist writing. But a careful reading reveals that her prose draws upon and displaces most of the major themes and motifs of at least two generations of Quebecois poetry (many of the same themes are found in the prose of the same period in a relatively diffuse manner; her intensity equals that of the poets Miron and Chamberland).[13]

In his comparative study on contemporary poetry in Canada and Quebec, Poésie des frontières, Clément Moisan describes the function of poetry in Quebec after the Second World War as being one of articulating a mutely-experienced collective reality:

> La poésie devient un des moyens de prendre conscience des difficultés de vivre et de survivre, une élucidation de la situation politique, social et économique comme tel, et son alienation.
> . . . . . .

> Le langage de cette poésie à pour fonction d'abord de nommer et de dire les réalités québécoises jusque-là ignorées ou travesties dans des formes importées et étrangères; puis d'assumer ces réalités, de les transformer si possible afin de s'ouvrir aux possibilités d'une existence libre, qui reste problématique, mais que le langage poétique, précisément par la force de ses images, de ses symboles et de ses mythes, rend accessible, sinon réele et vraie.[14]

He identifies three types of poetic language which grew out of that period, succeeding one another at roughly ten-year intervals.

> . . . un langage introspectif, où dominent le thème de la solitude et les images de nuit, de prison, de tombeau; un langage revendiatif, où la violence et la passion, la colère surtout, tentent d'imposer une vision du monde fondée sur la prise de conscience du pays comme réalité convergente des aspirations nouvelles de la collectivité; enfin un langage expérimental, fait de recherches formelles, destiné à sortir du masochisme latent, du vase clos, de la thématique précédente, pour retrouver l'Eden perdu ou en recréer un nouveau.
>
> (Poésie des frontières, 38)

The global movement of these poetic languages was toward the concrete realization of two thematic ideals: parole (the common phrase was la prise de parole--the accession to speech, with the concomitant power to name, to make real, to reject) and pays (both in the sense of an autonomous sovereign state and a more poetic sense of a marriage of the land and the Quebec people that would renew time and their collective history).[15]

The poets of L'Hexagone were those who spoke most eloquently the language of introspection and alienation. Gaston Miron, perhaps the finest of these poets, consistently personified Quebec, seeing the land as a female force, as a woman, a mother, a womb, a wife. In L'Homme rapaillé he writes:

et toi, Terre de Québec, Mère Courage,
dans ta longue marche, tu es grosse
de nos rêves charbonneux, douleureux,
de l'innombrable épuisement des corps et des âmes[16]

The fusion of woman with land is even more pronounced with Paul Chamberland, a poet who can be said to speak all three of these poetic languages. In Terre Québec one finds this same rhetorical trope:

femme ou pays double terre conjuguée dont j'étais
l'anneau de sève en elle et d'elle je transgressais
doucement
du regard et de l'acte les abattis de l'espace et du
temps
noué par tous mes membres à la substance natale aux
ténèbres
de la mine et du sein.[17]

Chamberland is also considered to be one of the poets loosely connected with the Parti Pris group of the 1960s. These were the writers who spoke the language of revolt; the writers who rejected the lyricism of the poésie du pays, making language itself a political arena through the use of the bastardized and impoverished French of poor urban Quebecois, known as joual. The use of non-standard French in literary texts was an attempt to insert the reality of the dispossession of the Quebec people into a language which, in essence, articulated a world-view not consonant with experiential reality. Here the act of writing began to take on explicitly political intentions. As Moisan notes: "Les poètes de Parti Pris dissocient rarement l'engagement politique et le langage: la poésie et révolution sont même chose" (54).

The political analysis of the Parti Pris group was a hybrid of classical Marxism and an assortment of ideas borrowed from Third-World decolonialization movements. Through polemic and aggressive

political action they hoped to achieve an independent, socialist, secular Quebec. This cycle of nationalist, pays-centred writing reached its apex during the late 1960s and early 1970s, then began to decline as younger writers, associated with the Barre du Jour and Les Herbes Rouges literary magazines, intrigued by continental experiments with language and the work of Derrida and the later Barthes and other poststructuralists, abandoned the language of revolt for that of formal innovation. The rise of the Parti Québécois and, perversely, the failed referendum of 1976 appeared to release the energies of Quebecois writers from political channels into other channels, other discourses. Some retreated from the immediate situation, delving into myth or intensely subjective private mythologies; others turned to fabulation (both traditional and postmodern) or deconstruction, turning away from the pays-dominated discourse of the past decades. It is evidently in contemporary feminist writing that the strongest traces of the nationalist project remain, though in a crucially altered configuration that causes the nationalist consciousness to turn upon itself and break open.

Early on in "Death is a Happy Ending: a dialogue in thirteen parts", a meandering conversation about English-Canadian literary history with Diane Bessai that was Kroetsch's contribution to Figures in a Ground, Bessai cites approvingly Kroetsch's dictum that Canadian literature somehow circumvented a modernist phase, "jumping" from the Victorian phase to the postmodern.[18] That statement was originally made by Kroetsch in an editor's introduction to a special

Canadian issue of boundary 2 in 1974. It reads:

> Canadian literature evolved directly from Victorian into Postmodern. Morley Callaghan went to Paris and met the Modern writers; he, for Canada, experienced the real and symbolic encounter; he, heroically and successfully, resisted. The country that invented Marshall McLuhan and Northrop Frye did so by not ever being Modern.[19]

It is a polemical statement with its own peculiar truth: of the prose written between 1920 (Ulysses was published in Paris in 1922) and the very late 1950s, the only two major prose writers who can be unhesitatingly qualified as modernist are Malcolm Lowry and Sheila Watson. It is only in their work that one has a sense of the text as a carefully made verbal and symbolic construct; only there that the modernist self-consciousness juts through the fiction and patterns the fictional world according to its own aesthetic dictates.

Censorship, the wars, the continuing necessity of articulating the land and the inscape of the agrarian society, the low productivity of those writers attuned to the evolution of the British and European traditions--such are the reasons for such a pronounced delay in the transmission of literary innovations from abroad. But it remains that the retardation of Modernism in English Canada was so severe that Watson and Lowry were destined to remain isolated figures, their prose affecting the literary practice of English Canada by slow degrees. Perhaps the only other immediately significant Canadian influence on Kroetsch's work is the poet Al Purdy, whose use of the colloquial voice, the "yarn" and other long, loose forms has been assimilated by Kroetsch. The attempt of the American poets William Carlos Williams and Charles Olson to structure long poems without using narrative were and remain particularly attractive to him as well;

and this tension between narrative and non-narrative discursive modes is evident not only in his own poetry, but also in his novels.

In interviews, Kroetsch has often spoken of his debt to the early British prose modernists, particularly Conrad. It was Conrad who taught him about ironic and ambiguous endings; the complexities of voice and fragmented, embedded narratives; the enormous tensions possible between narratorial levels and story; and, finally, the impossibility of the heroic mode.[20]

Later, writers from relatively removed traditions became important to his matured practice: in order to trace the most important prose influences that shape his aesthetic, elements of the recent American, French and South-American literary traditions must be investigated. In a fine study on Kroetsch, Peter Thomas writes that his main affinities are with those writers whose work demonstrates an acute concern for the "aesthetics of narrative" and the complexities of fictional artifice, particularly Conrad, Faulkner, Beckett, Nabokov, Borges and García Márquez.

> For while the characteristic Kroetsch hero is engaged upon some version of the male quest--in outline, probably the most familiar of all narrative structures--his actions are contained by complex ironies and parody. He moves in a world of language, of lies greater than his own, his freedom mocked by the contingencies of intricate fictions which deny him a sense of closure, of an ending.[21]

This places Kroetsch squarely in line with what some critics have called the "literature of exhaustion". The general subject of this kind of writing, Louis K. MacKendrick observes in "Robert Kroetsch and the Modern Canadian Novel of Exhaustion," is "fiction in the making, the creative process in action."[22] It is a discourse predicated upon

two notions: the exhaustion and obsolescence of received literary forms, and the reflexive nature of language and the literary idiom. Assuming that writing is self-conscious performance in an absurd world rather than the "codification of significances," the literature of exhaustion reposes upon the explosion and the inversion of older forms, engendering an anti-formalistic discourse that is, as Ihab Hassan describes it, "open, discontinuous, improvisational, indeterminate, . . . aleatory".[23]

The North-American novel of exhaustion is indebted to the poetic of the French Nouveaux romanciers. With other critics, Peter Thomas notes the sympathies existing between Kroetsch's novels and the Nouveau roman, observing that Kroetsch shares with Alain Robbe-Grillet the conviction that the contemporary novel is an exploration which creates its own significations, as it proceeds (1), later adding:

> In this Kroetsch takes part in the general movement described by Robbe-Grillet:
>
> After The Counterfeiters, after Nausea, we seem to be tending increasingly towards an age of fiction in which the problems of style and construction will be lucidly considered by the novelist, and in which critical preoccupations, far from sterilizing creation, can on the contrary serve it as a driving force. . . . The book makes its own rules for itself, and for itself alone. Indeed, the movement of its style must often lead to jeopardising them, even exploding them.
>
> (in Robert Kroetsch, 5-6)

These writers--the New Novelists (and the new New Novelists), Nabokov, Borges, Beckett and Kroetsch--are pushing hard at the limits of language, story and significant narrative structures, their fictional worlds threatening to break down into silence (their common subtext), or the exquisite paralysis of "infinite possibility", becoming elaborate, disjunctive, mirrored fictions turning in an abyss.

Magic realism, with its reaffirmation of story, however bizarre, illogical or technically sophisticated, can be understood as a counter-proposal that undertakes the re-enchantment of a world seeped of meaning by the decay of its ageing and rigid structures and relations. Kroetsch's fascination with this mode is a consummate expression of his ambivalent attraction to narrative. His admiration for the writing of García Márquez (particularly his novel One Hundred Years of Solitude), whose work is by turns lyrical, bizarre and savage, is a writer's fatal attraction to the spectacle of a world held in language, and an arsonist's pleasure at the spectacle of it destroyed by language.[24]

The growing tensions between the surfaces of narrative and those of the world found in the prose of Nicole Brossard and Robert Kroetsch testify to an intense and sustained dialogue between their writing and the discourse of past and present streams of innovative European and American writing. Theirs is a nascent discourse which is beginning to explore the play of possible relations between human and artistic orders, taking none of them for granted, seeing none of them as natural or inevitable.

CHAPTER TWO

NICOLE BROSSARD, DADA, SURREALISM, AND OTHER WONDER MERCHANTS: ÊTRES EN MOUVEMENT

> La médiocrité de notre univers ne depend-elle pas essentiellement de notre pouvoir d'énonciation?
> André Breton[1]

Since the mid 1970s Quebec has seen an explosion of feminist writing, its practitioners producing with amazing energy and rapidity texts that engage in parody, deconstruction, invective, satire, "anti-genres", and multi-media experimentation. Like the feminist movement in Europe and the rest of North America, the Quebec women's movement is decentred, polyphonic, and the most compelling debates about feminist literary poetics occur not between critics and these writers, but rather happen in the oblique dialogue between the work of one woman writer and that of another, and between the work of women writers who have broken with old allegiances and that of those who are inside the circular walls of the culture struggling to get out.

The history of Brossard's break with the old allegiances and the fusion of formal concerns with the problem of female being can be traced in the series of documents and essays she produced between 1970 and 1975. Because of the almost disorienting conceptual synergy of her thought, there are only two ways to broach Brossard's aesthetic as it begins to emerge from the time of the Document Miron in 1970 (where she espouses a literature she characterizes as subversive, efficient,

corrosive, offensive and unusable); either through an archaeology (in the common rather than Foucauldian sense of the word), or an eccentric analytic chronology.[2] Critics have offered schemata that randomly excavate traces not only of deconstructionists, but also traces of the Nouveau roman, Surrealism, Mallarmé and Joyce. Perhaps the most telling catalogue is found in Louky Bersianik's contribution to the symposium held in 1982 on Brossard's writing, which reads like a litany of continental modernity:

> Il y a d'abord les traces intertextuelles implicites ou explicites qui sont toutes importées d'Europe, d'un grand mouvement dit de modernité qui, en littérature, a pris corps, s'est solidifié principalement avec Barthes, Robbe-Grillet, Sollers et l'equipe de Tel Quel. Ce mouvement . . . avait pris naissance dans la lecture de Saussure, Marx, Freud, Mallarmé et des formalistes russes. . . .

She continues:

> On trouve donc chez Nicole Brossard, par voie indirecte de conséquence et parfaitement digéré et même remis sur d'autres rails de représentation, un peu de tout ce qui a proliféré par la suite de catégories conceptuelles chez Lacan, Lévi-Strauss, Foucault, Deleuze, Blanchot, Bataille, Hjemslev au Danemark, Chomsky en Amérique, et bien d'autres.
> . . . Après 1974, on voit apparaître . . . d'autres traces que j'appellerais 'cortextuelles' explicites d'écritures de femmes. Ce qui montre une évolution dans sa démarche: l'écrivain qui tient très haut le flambeau de la modernité outre-atlantique, devient une écrivaine tenant bien haut le flambeau du féminisme radical d'ici et d'ailleurs. Comparons par exemple des citations de l'Acte de l'Oeil dans L'Amèr en 1977, avec celles du Cortex exubérant daté de 1974. Dans ce dernier recueil, Nicole Brossard cite Rimbaud, Philippe Sollers, Hélène Cixous, Artaud, Bataille . . . Laborit, Barthes, Timothy Leary, Paul Chamberland, René Daumal, Joseph Vendryes, James Joyce, J.-M. LeClézio. . . . En 1977 . . . Brossard cite: Luce Irigaray, Virginia Woolf, Mary Barnes, Monique Wittig, Sandre Zeig, Claire Lejeune, Flora Tristan, Hélène Ouvrard, France Théoret, Huguette Gaulin.[3]

A staggering recitation; and one that points to a neglected actor in the evolution of modern poetics and literary practice in spite of the

work of Harold Innis and McLuhan. Since the beginning of this century, information technologies have been creating imaginary museums and libraries and institutes, a cybernetic system or an artificial transpersonal cortex that has been pooling human thought and its products so that what is being created now is the possibility of thinking together.

Like Kroetsch and most of her other contemporaries, Brossard does not posit reality as an absolute lying outside of human consciousness. Rather, it is seen as a contingent human creation constantly shaped and defined by collective "fictions" (versions, variantes) or frames of reference which condition and eventually replace human perception. Reality, then, is sustained not only by assent and the constant input of human energy, but also by language in all of its manifestations. In Brossard's reading, all human activities are implicitly forms of writing or discourses upon the physical world, the social world, human consciousness, and the body; and the residue that is the created world is a history of the human imagination working upon itself, earth and nothingness.[4] Necessarily, these discourses precede and engender reality as they cause the expansion or the contraction of human awareness and the boundaries of reality. And since this writing is directed by the human imagination, it is imagination which shapes the symbols that shape physical matter. Brossard insists upon the imagination as primum mobile repeatedly. In L'Amèr she writes "On n'accède au matérialisme que par la voie symbolique", and then again in the prose-poem-essay Amantes:

concrète en la fiction (source
allongée de toi)
du langage et de ses plis
la matière, toutes les marées à la limite
se présentent à mes tempes
peaux de convocation dans la perspective
des pactes_____étendues[5]

Her concept of the imagination is substantially that found in Sartre's incisive analysis of the nature and function of the imagination in the final chapter of his L'Imaginaire, psychologie phénoménologique de l'imagination. For Sartre, the essential prerequisite of a consciousness capable of imagining is the ability to posit a hypothesis of unreality. Consciousness is by nature intentional, Sartre writes,

> mais la conscience doit pouvoir former et poser des objets affectés d'un certain caractère de néant par rapport à la totalité du réel. On se rappelle en effet que l'objet imaginaire peut être posé comme inexistant ou comme absent ou comme existant ailleurs ou ne pas être posé comme existant. Nous constatons que le caractère commun à ces quatre thèses c'est qu'elles enveloppent toutes la catégorie de négation quoique à des degrés différents. Ainsi l'acte négatif est constitutif de l'image.

Hence, to imagine is to construct an object on the margins of reality: "poser une image c'est constituer un objet en marge de la totalité du réel, c'est donc tenir le réel à distance, s'en affranchir, en un mot le nier". The free consciousness must be able to posit the world in its synthetic totality and then negate it, or, as Sartre later puts it, go beyond the world. Paradoxically, the imagining consciousness is situated in the world, while the imaginary object that it posits arises from that world but is not part of it. Imagination, defined as the free negation of the world, is never arbitrary in its nature because, he argues, the world is always negated from a specific point

of view, a concrete situation or being-in-the-world which is the necessary condition for any act of imagination.

If, following Descartes, doubt is the primary condition of the cogito, and another mode of negating the world (more precisely, one of the functions of the imagining consciousness), then the true nature of the imagination is revealed. Imagination, as Sartre writes, is the whole of consciousness as it realizes its freedom:

> l'imagination n'est pas un pouvoir empirique et surajouté de la conscience, c'est la conscience tout entière en tant qu'elle se réalise; toute situation concrète et réele de la conscience dans le monde est grosse d'imaginaire. . . .

When imagination is not posited as a fact, Sartre continues, human being is swallowed up, "crushed by the world":

> lorsque l'imaginaire n'est pas posé en fait, le dépassement et la néantisation de l'existant sont elisés dans l'existant, le dépassement et la liberté sont là mais ils ne se découvrent pas, l'homme est écrasé dans le monde, transpercé par le réel, il est le plus près de la chose.[6]

The first consequence of this corrosive poetic of relativity is that reality no longer has any absolute stability. The old dichotomy opposing fiction to truth is superseded by the concept that fiction and imagination are avenues to a potentially enlarged reality. In "E muet mutant", her important 1975 essay on the necessity of a feminist literary practice and the potentialities of female being, Brossard writes:

> Le dictionnaire lie à la fiction, le feindre, la dissimulation et le mensonge. À la fiction on oppose la vérité. Intervenir donc dans cet ordre réducteur et avancer dans l'espace fictionnel, le terrain sans frontière prévisible de l'imaginaire, de la dérive en somme d'une énergie qui se dissémine.[7]

Brossard's use of the terms "fiction" and "fictitious" is rich, though often paradoxical and idiosyncratic. The subtle nuances of both the conventional and the etymological meanings of these words are exploited in her writing; often one possible meaning is played off against another one, so that the polysemic nature of language is thrown into disturbing relief, and her text set adrift from the body of conventional words that moor it. The four salient meanings of the word "fiction" in her work can be roughly categorized as follows:

1--fiction as artifice; something shaped by a collectivity or an individual mind, which is either recognized as a human product or considered as natural because of its age or the efficacy with which its origins were mystified (see the example cited in 2)

2--fiction in the sense of mensongère; that is, as misleading, or untrue, or inauthentic, or uncritically accepted.

> . . . la realité a été, pour la plupart des femmes, une fiction, c'est-à-dire le fruit d'une imagination qui n'est pas la leur et à laquelle elles ne parviennent pas réellement à s'adapter. Nommons ici quelques fictions: la guerre, la montée du prix de l'or, le Telé-Journal, la pornographie, l'érotisme ou les charmes discrets du viol.[8]

3--fiction as hypothesis; the assumption of a possibility irrespective of the question of its truth or reality.

> Car on ne peut bavarder indéfiniment sans reproduire dans l'illusion de la vérité, le manque et les failles de cette vérité, les ratés de cette vérité, sans tomber dans le jeu de la fiction c'est-à-dire du si. Ou en d'autres termes dans l'inventaire ou l'invention du possible, du plausible, de l'inédit, de l'hypothèse, de l'extravagance et du tout à coup que.[9]

4--fiction as that which is not yet real, or that which is moving toward the state of being "real" (i.e. apprehended by a critical mass of minds); hence, phenomena that are either in a state of limbo or in the process of crystallising out of the realm of the fictive.

> Nos voix circulaient dans l'espace du théâtre, mais aucun des spectateurs de pouvait identifier nos visages,

> nos gestes, l'expression de nos yeux, l'ouverture de nos bouches. Nous étions la fiction même, des voix cachées. Nous sommes encores fictives.[10]

In short, Brossard argues that reality is the product of a continuous dialectic between the real and the potential, the sediment left behind by the flow of human consciousness interacting with itself, past worlds, earth and power. Language is the always contingent and imperfect articulation of the relationship between that consciousness and each thing perceived in the existing physical and conceptual worlds. Imagination and reality and language call one another into being.

But in Brossard's scenario there is no lost Greek Eden where a perfect correspondence between word and thing existed, having emerged out of the authentic ground of Being into language.[11] For her, etymology is the radical art of excavating layer upon layer of meaning from a word in order to retrace how that word and human consciousness shaped one another; and underneath the primal meaning of a word is always the final discovery of the absence of a ground of essential being. The primal ground (Ur-grund) is the abyss (Ab-grund). Therefore, her investigations into language must not only move backward down into the word, as with Heidegger, but also forward, anticipating and channeling the consensual flow of consciousness.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Brossard almost inevitably employs spatial figures to express this relation between le réel and le fictif. Figures such as terrain, champ, frontière, brèche and horizon are used to articulate the modes in which reality and fiction exist and interpenetrate one another. And although she vehemently rejects psychologism at the level of narrative, plot and agent development, her essays

testify to an obsession with exploring the function of fiction at the level of the collective psyche, where it appears to work in conjunction with aspects of the unconscious. In an interview in 1979 she remarked that her field of exploration was the frontier between the fictive and the real:

> . . . entre l'inconscient et le conscient (au milieu duquel il y a un espace rempli de lettres qui deviendront mots).
> . . . Mais ce qui m'intéresse présentement, c'est de déplacer ce qu'on a toujours refoulé dans le champ du fictif, de l'amener peu à peu, en investissant les mots que j'utilise, dans l'ordre du réel. C'est de rendre désormais plausibles des aspects de la réalité refoulés dans le champ de l'inconscient. Un exemple: aujourd'hui, l'homosexualité est une réalité plausible. Il y a cinquante ans, elle était socialement fiction. Tout un champ du fictif est maintenant passé dans le lieu de la réalité. La rue Saint-Denis est une fiction plausible maintenant. La circulation des délires chevauchent la réalité et la fiction.

And a few moments later she added:

> Pour moi la fiction, c'est ça. Une énergie qui traverse les mots et qui dans cette traversée prend forme, donne à la réalité une autre forme. Le champ du fictif empiète un peu plus chaque jour sur le champ de la réalité . . . . je puis dire que maintenant je suis obsédée par la fiction; ici, par la réalité, là et par le territoire expérimental qui se situe entre elles. Ce territoire est rempli de mots en puissance; on y risque sa peau, on y trouve des clés.[13]

For Brossard, writing begins in this "experimental territory" between fiction and reality, this place where new words begin to crystallize and precipitate out into the pool of shared language. And since language is the shared, collective semiotic system that defines the nature and the limits of the real while bridging both zones, the act of writing becomes a manner of expanding or contracting the field of the real (i.e., collective reality) and that of the individual human consciousness. It is also a manner of concretizing immanent

phenomena that swim in the human imagination, so that writing almost begins to take on the cast of divination or prophecy; and the writer, as in Pound's formulation, becomes the antennae of the race, able to apprehend the arrival of new forms and new relations.[14]

> On peut imaginer l'écriture comme un rapprochement ou comme une concrète volonté d'attirer vers soi les figures essentielles de la pensée/ou encore/de voir son désir s'approcher le plus loin possible au bord: tout à fait à la limite, là où ça peut basculer.[15]

To write, then, is not only to anticipate or to gain access to the means of symbolic production (language), but also to intervene in the direction in which language and consciousness flow. In "Naissance et dispersion du désir" Brossard writes:

> Je finirai bien par affirmer qu'écrire (errer) c'est se pourvoir du droit d'intervention dans la langue collective. Dire qu'écrire c'est dévier, éviter le plus court chemin, choisir le detour parce que ce faisant, animer le désir de durer, durer longtemps sous l'éclairage de l'inédit. Nouvelle distance à parcourir.[16]

The rest of the essay is given over to a defense of errance. The central argument runs as follows:

> Sans cette errance, sans cet enfoncement en territoire interdit, sans cette transgression du langage, l'écrivain risque de se perdre aux pièges de la périphrase et de la tautologie. . . . l'errance se situe au niveau d'un désir conscient, bien assumé, celui qui cherche à intervenir dans le déroulement de la pensée, de l'expression, de l'anecdote. Errer, c'est . . . commettre le délit syntaxique et/ou lexical plausible. Plausible mais imprévu au moment où s'amorce la disponibilité à l'acte d'écriture.

Here the violation of consensual linguistic structures is synonymous with an attack on consensual reality:

> L'intervention textuelle crée le malaise, le développe. . . . L'errance suggère un espace à remplir; l'intervention structure cet espace et le transforme en zone d'initiation

> où s'affrontent les ramifications du quotidien et de l'imaginaire par l'entremise du code linguistique et des interférences que nous lui soumettons.

L'errance disturbs the smooth and continuous surface of that reality, its uni-directional flow of meaning:

> L'errance-intervention ne saurait s'exercer dans la linéarité. C'est par un effet de discontinuité que les mots s'étendent les uns des autres dans un jeu de raccords et de coupures. L'écrivain branche et débranche les mots et les phrases au fur et à mesure qu'il avance dans le réseau linguistique. . . . Coupant et redonnant la communication comme pour laisser VOIR, à intervalles choisis, la géographie d'une region précise mais plurielle d'interprétations. . . .[17]

The appearance of the essay "Vaseline" one year later (1973) pursues the idea of transgression as a necessary artistic strategy. Here she asserts that the transgression of conventions is neither gratuitous nor primarily political in intent; rather, it is motivated by a "strange fascination" with obscured things: "La transgression est un pré-requis a l'entrée en matière, au voyage de connaissance et de plaisir que nous nous devons à l'égard de nous-mêmes" (in Double Impression, 39). Transgression, she writes, occurs when the artist or thinker, compelled by this strange fascination with what lies beyond the bords (the brink, borders, outskirts, shores, edges) of language, enters the area belongong to mystics, visionaries, and psychotics; a zone where one must play necessarily or lose the way out:

> Avoir peur (l'épreuve): transgresser: avoir peur. Connaître les lieux de Greco, de William Blake, la schizophrénie, le présent délirant, la blancheur désertique, 'un voyage, une pénétration dans la lumière'. Quel moteur? contre le circonscrit, le déterminé. Eréthisme devant le contrôle établi sur nos appétits desquels nous voulons tout savoir (leur possible, leur impossible).
>
> Moteurs: on franchit des interdits, des lieux de contradiction. On passe: jurons, obscénités, vulgarités,

> joual-slang. On traverse: sous l'effet des moteurs, des souffles, des énergies électriques, les espaces possibles apparaissent, s'allongent: GARDEZ CE RÊVE DANS VOS POUMONS.
>
> (in Double Impression, 46-47)

Transgression--whether on a social, sexual, aesthetic, ideological or political plane--is a dangerous road to knowledge. Anomie is one probable outcome, and repression is certainly another. But, driven by the sense that wholeness and knowledge and being are interned on the other side of the wall of old perceptions, she chooses to join the society of Outsiders and counsel transgression to her readers and to herself, though they and she become perpetual refugees, migratory beings who break ground that must be abandoned:

> De préférence, transgresser toutes les idéologies, la dominante plus nécessairement que toute autre. Transgresser: traverser, aller vivre plus loin, avec assez de bonheur pour être bientôt obligé de changer de terrain quand tous arrivent, quand il n'y a plus de découverte, de plaisir, de conscience, QUAND LA VIANDE COMMENCE À SE TRAFIQUER.
>
> (in Double Impression, 45)

To write is also to seek a way of existing beyond the "pleasure/repression" dichotomy that separates knowledge and Eros. It is an act of deconditioning that is not a suicide into language, but a means of survival, an act of hope that female being can emerge from the sea-foam of our language. This is how Nicole Brossard put it in an interview taped in October 1976:

> . . . l'écriture . . . un acte de déconditionnement, de décolonialisation que l'on opère par rapport à soi en tant que sujet. L'écriture, c'est un acte qui s'inscrit dans le plaisir parce que c'est un acte gratifiant. C'est un acte de sublimation; ce n'est pas un acte de déséspoir, ce n'est past un acte suicidaire, c'est au contraire un acte de vie.[18]

These ideas are elaborated upon in "E muet mutant", the essay she published in a special Barre du jour issue on women and language:

> Ecrire c'est se faire voir. En faire voir de toutes les formes et de toutes les couleurs. S'imposer au regard de l'autre avant qu'il ne s'impose.
> . . . . . .
> Toute écriture (si médiocre qu'elle puisse être) est une affirmation de soi et, en ce sens, c'est le lieu par excellence où la femme y trouve une autonomie.
> Manifestement l'écriture de la femme en est une qui doit s'imposer doublement au regard. S'exposer comme un corps de femme sexagénaire. S'exposer pour ce qu'il est et non pour la représentation que les autres s'en font. Le texte féminin doit faire casser (cesser) le plus grand nombre de peurs, de tabous, d'intimidations. Pas une seconde s'écrire dans la distraction et l'habitude. Il doit couper les ponts d'avec la symbolique qui immobilise la pensée féminine. Par quels méandres? Par quelles techniques?
> Ce texte ne peut pas se permettre un aveu de fuite, non plus que d'agression en tant que telle. Il faut qu'il remonte le cours de la conscience.
> (in Double Impression, 55-56)

Writing is a public gesture which allows women, collectively and individually, to enter into history and participate in what Brossard terms "the collective memory".[19]

> La parole de la femme est sans conséquence, avons-nous dit, puisque entre autres raisons, elle n'insère pas dans l'histoire (elle est sans pouvoir décisionnel). Mais il n'en va pas de même pour ce qu'elle écrit et publie. D'abord parce que son geste devient public, qu'il passe par des voies hiérarchiques, un jugement culturel; . . . D'abord parce que son geste est inscrit, concret: le livre. Il entre dans des lieux intimes et publics . . . . Il entre dans l'histoire. Il participe à la mémoire collective. . . . Elle devient sujet. Elle propose. Impose son sujet--souvent celui de sa parole censurée. Elle transgresse le discours masculin dans la mesure où elle cesse de se transgresser, dans la mesure où elle s'élargit du verbe et ne lui court plus après.
> (in Double Impression, 55)

These statements point to an intriguing divergence in contemporary literary practice that can be freely observed. There

appear to be two contrary movements that strain against one another in North American prose: one, using writing to pull one's self and one's experience of reality into being, into a "world", as Heidegger might have put it, however tentative or open-ended (these writers are primarily female or members of some minority); the other, seeing writing as a dissolution of the individual self into language and the sum of previous discourses (Hubert Aquin, John Barth and so on). These two contrapuntal movements enact a bizarre but essentially existential tension. One writes out of the compulsion to "be", to become a sujet, an empowered actor (in ontological terms); the other seems to write out of a fatigue with being, or, possible, as the consequence of some secret defeat, some profound impasse.

The recognition that writing in its various forms has historically been aligned with societal power is fundamental to the work of many recent thinkers: for Jacques Ellul's work on the mechanisms that cause the centralization of political power; Claude Lévi-Strauss' Tristes Tropiques, where the anthropologist analyses the consequences of the emergence of writing among the Nambikwara tribe, finding that the themes of exploitation and writing go naturally together, as do those of writing and violence; and for Michel Foucault's examination of the historical relations between body, mind, madness and power. Similar conclusions about the alliance between writing and the centralization of societal power are found in Brossard's "La prose maintenant" (1971).

> l'écriture
> 'associée de façon permanente dans ses origines à des sociétés fondées sur l'exploitation de l'homme par l'homme'
>
> Entretiens avec Claude Lévi-Strauss

> l'écriture: accumuler les connaissances. Les inscrire en lieu sûr à l'épreuve du temps. Pierre, papyrus, papier et . . . maintenant bandes sonores. Langage déployé dans l'espace et dans le temps, ramené à sa dimension (discours enregistré le . . .). donc l'écriture, l'écrit: objet. Souvent bibelot. De luxe. Servant à tuer l'ennui. Ou passeport social. Ou Proclamation par ordre de sa Majesté. Ou carte d'identité.
>
> (in Double Impression, 35-36)

This is the same insight that haunted Roland Barthes throughout his critical career. His way of escaping from doxa and the crushing dialectic of the discourse of power was to refuse to provide a coherent, "repetitive" discourse that could be subsumed and subsequently neutralized in that discourse. From the time of Le Plaisir du texte (1973) he practiced "pulverized", "erotic/aesthetic discourse", cultivating parataxis, ellipsis, and the fragment, rejecting formal or semantic closure in the hope of conducting an "indirect, transitive discourse" that might be exempt from meaning.[20] The deliberately fissured, unreadable (illisible), centrifugal writing of the later Barthes and of poststructuralists in general is a common strategy deployed against the recuperation of their texts by the discourse of power.

Brossard assumes and intensifies the centrifugal impulse of poststructural writing, evolving a guerrilla poetic that employs language as a form of aggressive gesture, as disjunctive speech that cannot be resolved into a coherent discourse or stable ideology. This disruption of the consensual symbolic and semantic grammar creates and exploits the fissures inherent in language. Devastated semantic fields become zones where le fictif may agitate or infiltrate consensual reality as the writing moves forward constantly, tentative and exploratory, leaving behind texts that cannot be engaged by the

logic or the discourse of power, in which old relations have become inoperative.

> Je ne veux pas prendre au sérieux le tout social qui me contredit. Nécessairement je dis contre. Je contredis, je me contredis et je finis par me taire; je passe de l'esprit dialectique à une conscience qui s'exerce et qui passe par d'autres modes d'ouverture, de compréhension et d'action.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Le terrain de la raison ressemble étrangement à un champ de bataille: chacun ses positions, chacun son temps de stratégie. Pour que l'affrontement (la discussion, le débat) ait lieu il faut d'abord connaître et accepter la règle du jeu, s'y encrasser, au demeurant toujours au profit de celui qui déclare ce jeu valable et plus rentable toujours dans le sens d'une meilleure performance dans une practique de vie qui concerne si peu et qui aime si peu la vie.
>
> (in Double Impression, 60)

But, as she warns in the same essay, these openings in the discourse must constantly be probed, or they will close over and trap the mind exploring them:

> La fiction troue le discours, le désamorce et si on a ni le temps ni la curiosité d'aller voir par le trou, il devient vite l'oeil obsédant de papa qui watche. Il devient le cercle encombrant, la limite, la répétition. Le cercle de l'internement. La folie ronde qui tournoie et qui blesse l'oeil du voyeur. Si on n'y regarde, il perd sa fonction d'ouverture et ne sert plus à la voyance. Il annule sa fiction et devient de fiction (cf. le dictionnaire: de convention).
>
> (in Double Impression, 66-67)

The necessary movement of Brossard's thought and of her fiction, however exploratory, is, finally, towards reality and a greater personal lucidity. In the entry for March 26, 1983, found in her Journal intime she writes:

> J'écris avec mes yeux. . . . Je me concentre souvent sur ce que je perçois comme pour alléger les choses et résumer le temps; je me concentre afin de ne percevoir que ce qui m'entraine au-dela de la réalité. Mais alors, il ne faut

> pas oublier le chemin du retour ou plutôt à chaque fois réinventer une nouvelle route qui me ramenera à la réalité. Il n'y a pas libre circulation de la pensee si la pensée se limite à revenir sur elle-même en empruntant toujours le même paysage imaginaire. Tous les jours, il me faut risquer de nouvelles postures mentales sinon je sombre dans l'anecdote de la pensée. . . .
>
> (Journal intime, 63-64)

This equation of writing with lucidity demands that the writer keep a guarded distance from every fiction, every text, including his or her own. In Amantes Malcolm Lowry appears as a cardinal instance of the writer caught in the web of his own "cerebral spinning":

> 'Le volcan a certainement libéré Lowry, mais il s'est passé quelque chose de particulier, une simultanéité entre lui et son personnage, plus qu'une identité, un échange de personnalité . . . . En fait, passage de l'un dans l'autre, de l'écrivain dans son écrit au point de s'y enfermer, de telle sorte qu'il . . . est mis dans son propre enfer. Il y a une interview de Lowry, on lui demande ce qu'il voudrait écrire, et il repond: Under, under, under the volcano.'
>
> c'est la pire chose qui puisse m'arriver. cela m'est arrivé. depuis, je n'arrête pas de lire pour remonter à la surface, pour retrouver mes surfaces.
>
> (Amantes, 20)

This lucidity that critical reading and/or writing brings is one way to achieve recueillement (in Brossard's discourse, a state of meditation, of an almost religious contemplation and withdrawal from language and consensual reality). This is Clément Moisan's explanation of the term in Poésie des frontières:

> L'isolement nécessaire, dont parle Nicole Brossard . . . est un retrait volontaire du monde, qui permet de prendre ses distances par rapport aux mots, afin d'en connaître les pouvoirs dissimulateurs. L'écriture est précisément la prise de conscience aiguë de la spécificité du texte à tout déploiement littéraire, et qui, par le fait même, le démasque sur son propre terrain, lequel est essentiellement lieu de vérification, de tentative, d'innovation, de correction.
>
> (Poésie des frontières, 228)

This strategic withdrawal is the movement necessary for the unfolding of the "sixth sense" that Brossard refers to in "L'épreuve de la modernité", the sense that only now has achieved its maturity in the history of the development of female consciousness in occidental civilization, which calls into question the notion of intelligence, "the totality of mental functions having conceptual and rational knowledge as their object (opposed to sensation and intuition)".[21] This is the unnatural sense that proposes alternate forms of gnosis; and it is undoubtedly the sense that informs Brossard's deconstructive textual practices and her critique of consensual reality.

The inevitable issue of Brossard's understanding of the nature of fiction, culture, the human imagination and writing is the idea of world as being constituted by a network of interdependent texts and semiotic systems laid over the void and earth. Although the void is inescapably present at the centre of its constructs, world attempts to totalize itself and convince the individual that, to add one more twist to Derrida's celebrated mot, "il n'y a pas de hors-texte". These world-texts, their fictiveness long forgotten and their origins mystified, are assimilated as a stable consensual reality. They become rigid textes de loi that delimit and congeal the real, concealing the essential fact that world and human being are process and flux.

Brossard perceives analogous dynamics operating in the literary system. In "L'épreuve de la modernité" (1980) her formulation of the essential tension between the texte-fétiche and writing is similar to but more radical that Kroetsch's formulation of the essential

tension between tradition and writing (the texte fictif).

> Je prend pour acquis . . . que le texte-fétiche a recouvert la Littérature, cette pratique de l'écrit qui consiste à inscrire la part expressive d'une mémoire enracinée dans un environnement à la fois géographique, social, culturel et qui rappelle le lieu de nos origines et nos premiers stimuli. C'est pour éviter que ses origines 'honteuses' (idéologiquement parlant) . . . ne se manifestent dans son écriture que peu à peu l'écrivain va devenir un écrivant.[22]

The object of Brossard's critique is the idea of universality (a concept that reposes upon a canon of texts whose articulation of reality has been elevated to the level of the paradigmatic). This false aesthetic ideal causes writers to deny or negate their own experiential reality, opting instead for the elaboration and repetition of the world and the language masked by the idea of universality. The consequence: the essentially exploratory and affirmational nature of writing is blunted or neutralized formally as well as semantically, enhancing the possibility that a number of kinds of cultural amnesias or insanities will occur.[23] The very notion of universality is seen as a technique of negation and a denial of différance.

In Brossard's aesthetic writing must question and subvert the premises of the texte-fétiche (and, implicitly, the texte de loi). Because the text being written is a ludic space where the real and the fictitious converge, the texte-fictif can and must investigate the norms and conventions that sustain these two other categories of texts. This, writes Brossard, is the place where writing begins again, perpetually.

> Il est possible d'admettre que tout sujet écrivant se meut d'abord dans un lieu de refus parce qu'il est constamment déplacé dans sa production de fantasmes et de pulsions. . . . Ce refus c'est aussi la rature mais en même temps que la rature le recommencement infini de l'écriture. . . .

> écrire, ce n'est jamais comprendre tout à fait. En ce sens, cela peut être le lieu essentiel duquel sourd le concept de relativité. . . .
>
> (in Double Impression, 65)

In Brossard's aesthetic the text is a ground for the investigation and the modification of language and reality. It is, as Moisan writes, "un lieu de vérification, de tentative, d'innovation, de correction" (228). It is also a field in which to investigate the processes and norms of literary production. Here Brossard makes little distinction between her critical and her creative discourses: her first novel, Un livre (1970), is in effect a fictional exposition of her theory of the text. In his introduction to the re-issue of the work, Claude Beausoleil notes the affinities existing between Un livre and the discourse of the French New Novel, particularly the inclination toward textual anatomy and the subsequent frustration of narrative:

> S'appartenant par son refus du psychologisme traditionnel aux démarches du Nouveau roman français, le livre de Nicole Brossard proposait une réévaluation de la situation écriture/lecture. Il tentait de scruter les règles propres à ces deux actes en faisant un cheminement d'observations concrètes et éclatées qui de page en page remettaient en question 'des itinéraires' que le roman québécois ne nous avait pas vraiment habitués à bousculer. . . .
>
> (Un livre, i)

These itineraries, which can even be discerned in Quebecois romances and fantasies, are, I believe, the following: coherent, causal narratives, and coherent fictional worlds inhabited by reliable narrators or implied authors who define the limits of the fictional world and act as initiators, guides, and stable points of reference. Brossard's discourse, which declines to produce that type of narrative in favour of observing its own internal processes, which is at once "objet et laboratoire. Découverte. Dé de hasard. Effet de rupture",

has few antecedents in Quebecois prose.[24] The comment she made in a 1979 interview, that she was conducting the trial of the clichés attributed to fiction, clarifies her rejection of the anecdote and simple narrative.

> C'est le procès de la réalité à peine transposée dans le roman. L'anecdote ennuie. . . . 'raser les intrigues.' Je ne peux consentir à aucune fiction qui prend sa source dans le drame. Parce que pour moi, le drame ne peut surgir uniquement que lorsque la petite morale bourgeoise fait la loi. . . . Face au drame, je ne peux que manifester, ou délirer, c'est-à-dire signifier d'une manière ou d'une autre que je suis ailleurs.
>
> Je suis donc continuellement sur mes gardes en ce qui concerne l'anecdote-fiction-basée-sur-le-réel.[25]

With this statement the degree to which Brossard's prose aesthetics are indebted to the Nouveau roman begins to be evident. Bernard Pingaud, writing in the 1959 issue of Yale French Studies on Midnight Novelists and Others, observes the peculiar nature of the association of writers who were to become known as proponents of the Nouveau roman: these writers are not held together by a common style or ideology, they are "related in negation--though their aims differ, their refusals are identical".[26] Unanimously rejecting the traditional view of the function of literature as expression and representation, these novelists recognized a fundamental tension between what Jean Ricardou terms the "referential illusion" and the "literal illusion" in the literary medium. In Le Nouveau roman he explains this tension schematically:

> Ce que nous appelons récit est donc une narration qui élabore la littéralité de la fiction, en référence avec ce que, pour simplifier, nous nommons quelquefois le quotidien. Le bon fonctionnement du récit demande une ordonnance littérale telle que le lecteur puisse aisément la mettre en veilleuse et prendre Salomé pour un être de chair et de sang. Bref, il suscite une illusion par l'effacement de ce qui est

> matérial dans le texte: la littéralité. . . .
>
> La courbe de la fiction se divise donc, très schématiquement, en deux domaines. Celui de l'euphorie du récit, ou domine la composante référentielle; celui de la contestation du récit, où domine la composante littérale. Ainsi tout récit est-il astreint au jeu subtil, retors, byzantin quelquefois, de l'euphorique et du contestataire.[27]

The euphoria of realistic narrative had long since faded for the New Novelists. They held that the form and the content of Balzacian realism that had survived into the twentieth century was the outmoded, impossible and absurd repetition of the forms, the order, and the relations of a dead world. In an essay collected in Pour un nouveau roman Alain Robbe-Grillet conducts a scathing indictment of the ideological implications of nineteenth-century realistic narrative. The narrative, he asserts, represents an order that is linked to an entire "rationalistic and organizing system". All of the technical devices employed by that type of narrative (the use of the passé simple, chronology, causal and linear plots, the "regular trajectory of the passions") affirmed the image of a "stable, coherent, continuous, unequivocal, entirely decipherable universe".[28] Robbe-Grillet and the other New Novelists rejected the formal techniques and the larger implications of the order and relations of realism, because encoded within its conventions was the grammar of an inoperative world.

These perceptions are reiterated in Michel Butor's influential essay "Le Roman comme recherche", which explores how narrative constructs reality. In Butor's view, the novel is a particular form of narrative, and narrative is a generic phenomenon. It is "one of the essential components of our understanding of reality" because, from the moment the individual is initiated into society (through the acquisition of language), he is "perpetually surrounded by narrative",

and each specific form of narrative, whether it be history, religion, a metaphysical system, or the news, links that individual to a "particular segment of reality".[29] Two types of narrative are i identified by Butor in this text: récits véridiques (verifiable or "veracious" narratives) and fiction (formes romanesques). The decisive difference between them is explained in phenomenological terms:

> . . . peu à peu, en devenant publics et historiques les récits véridiques se fixent, s'ordonnent, et se réduisent, selon certains principes (ceux-là mêmes de ce qu'est aujourd'hui le roman 'traditionnel', le roman qui ne se pose pas de question). . . . elle recouvre peu à peu l'expérience réelle, se fait passer pour celle-ci, aboutissant ainsi à une mystification généralisée.
> (Essais sur le roman, 9)

The novel, on the other hand, is the "phenomenological realm par excellence", "the best possible place to study how reality appears to us, or might appear". The exploration of novelistic forms can reveal what is contingent or suppressed in prevailing constructs of reality, thereby offering the reader and the writer the possibility of release from those constructs, which Butor defines as "ce récit fondamental dans lequel baigne notre vie entière" (10). His conclusion, then, is that formal invention in the novel is the absolutely fundamental condition of a "more searching realism" (un réalisme plus poussé) (11).

As some critics have suggested, the evolution of the New Novel can be seen as an attempt to respond to a changing understanding of reality: since Nietzsche, occidental thought had been forced to begin abandoning its essentialist bases, while physics was discovering the discontinuous and paradoxical nature of the physical world, and psychology and philosophy were exploring the instability of personal

identity, the intensely subjective dynamics of human consciousness and being. If generic narrative shapes consciousness and reality by producing or reproducing a system of general structures and relations (world-matrices), then the forms and the very grammar of literary narratives would forcibly have to undergo dissections to free writing and consciousness from the senile repetition of outmoded forms.

To write consciously, then, would be not to reproduce reality (the textes de loi and the texte-fétiche), but, as Ricardou asserts, to produce "reality" and "meaning" (sens) through the conscious manipulation of textual forms and elements. This highly self-conscious writing, guided by a lucid synthesis of theory and innovative literary practice, slowly transforms its own bases in a steady movement away from the paralysis of realism towards possibility. For the theoreticians and practitioners of the New Novel, the two most important bases to be transformed in the alchemy of the text were language and the generic narrative structures of consensual reality. This is Ricardou on language in Pour une théorie du nouveau roman:

> Les mots . . . ne possèdent pas un groupe de sens clos. Le texte n'est pas un espace neutre où viennent s'assembler des sens inaltérables; c'est un milieu de transformation, une machine à changer le sens.[30]

Words and meaning exist in a de facto interdependence in the closed world of the text; one element inevitably modifies another (for instance, Ricardou's simple example of je bois/le bois), transforming or subverting the attributes and the relations of one sign or a cluster of signs, emptying them or causing them to resonate with a richly corrosive ambiguity. But with a few notable exceptions, the New Novelists' experimentation with the polysemic and generative

potential of language was limited. Although they had the example of surrealist play with the contextual transmutation of language, the New Novelists were intent upon thwarting and exposing the mechanisms of linear narrative, leaving Philippe Sollers and other writers associated with the Tel Quel group to pursue the purely generative potential of language in their intensely centrifugal prose a few years later.

The operations the New Novelists performed upon "traditional" narrative were rather violent and often hallucinatory. In Nouveaux problèmes du roman Ricardou enumerates the categories of sabotaged narratives found in the New Novel: "le récit excessif, le récit abymé, le récit dégéneré, le récit avarié, le récit transmuté, le récit enlisé" (10).[31] One of the most important differences between the New Novel and earlier modernist texts that rejected traditional narrative is that the plane of reality has been removed from the level of story to the level(s) of the narrator or the implied author, and the concern with rendering the processes of consciousness (which frustrate the development of simple narrative) has been removed to those same levels. The raw material of story becomes phantasmal as the process of creating or rendering story gains reality and immediacy. In the New Novel agents become flat, disembodied, anonymous vehicles for the working out of some pattern or organizing principle; they are pulses in the text, variables, pronominal agents, or personnages grammaticales; the textured density and coherence of the mimetic fictional world gives way to the sheen of textual surfaces, bas-reliefs, the syncopated, obsessive rhythms of the regard or the mise en abyme. The traditional preterite is supplanted by an amorphous present tense that conflates temporal levels and dissolves chronology and narrative logic.

Narrators, whether intra- or extra-diegetic, are unreliable, subversive or absented. The fictional world becomes hallucinatory, riddled with holes, overwhelmed by events that can neither be ordered nor fully understood. These texts, as Ann Jefferson points out, have "no telos, no centre full of truth. . . . only a void at the centre of the narrative".[32]

The void found at the centre of all of Robbe-Grillet's novels is the primary object of study in Olga Bernal's Alain Robbe-Grillet: le roman de l'absence.[33] The New Novel, she states, is the novel turning upon and negating itself: "tout son effort est une dénonciation, une négation de soi" (9). This auto-negation of the novel also involves the destruction of the image of occidental man, "le mythe de l'humain . . . formé par la culture gréco-latine" (10), encoded within the traditional novel of plenitude. Robbe-Grillet's novels, in contrast, are seen by Bernal as the formal culmination of the modern experience of nothingness at the centre of reality (101). Robbe-Grillet refuses either to hide or "fill" this void. His novels become "stories of absence", stories about the absence at the centre of reality that causes his actants and his narrative to break down into absurdity and futility. This, writes Bernal, is "modern realism" (248).

In Quebec, the techniques of the Nouveau roman were assimilated by writers who sought to express the reality of their cultural situation in essentially formal terms. Hubert Aquin's novels are undoubtedly the most consummate instance where the theme of le mal d'habiter and contemporary Quebecois reality receive a vertiginous

formal treatment. In Hubert Aquin, agent double Patricia Smart characterizes his writing as a body of work that seeks equilibrium in a profoundly fissured and alienated world, one that takes up the great theme of the Quebecois novel--alienation--and its attendant themes (the obsession with the absolute, flight, vertigo) with the conscious intention of putting an end to that alienation.[34] He wanted, Smart continues, to "prendre possession du relatif dans tout sa fragmentation et sa discontinuité" (11). His intrigues are explicitly designed to draw the reader into a world of relativity and discontinuous perceptions, where his understanding of reality was to be transmuted. Smart traces the characteristic movement of Aquin's intrigues:

> Partis à la recherche d'une solution à ces enigmes, nous quittons la surface familière des choses pour nous égarer au coeur d'un labyrinthe où la réalité échappe à nos concepts unilateraux et à nos catégories traditionnelles. La destruction des anciennes façons de voir est le premier pas vers une nouvelle perception, celle-ci dialectique . . . . La lecture des romans d'Aquin est une descente en spirale vers un centre hors d'atteinte qui représente la pleine possession du réel.
>
> (Hubert Aquin, agent double, 7-8)

Aquin's search for an aesthetic capable of reconciling "art and history" (11) led him to evolve a neo-baroque literary practice which rejected the coherence and closure of the traditional literary work for the sophisticated incoherence arising from the synthesis of the techniques of the Nouveau roman and older baroque forms. The literary text was to be open, fuyant, mobile, paradox-ridden, ironic, hallucinatory, polyphonic, chaotic, autonomous, echoué and yet subversive. Rather than reproducing the ideal structures of genre or reality, the text was to reproduce the deep structures of the experiential reality of the individual and the collectivity. Smart

explains:

> Ainsi c'est au niveau de la forme que le problème de l'écrivain québécois se pose à Aquin. L'oeuvre littéraire reproduit la structure profonde de la réalité de l'écrivain; et puisque la réalité québécoise est en train d'éclater, l'oeuvre aussi subira un éclatement structural, syntaxique et langagier: 'L'ancienne oeuvre, prévisible, sereine et agencée selon le chiffre d'or, devient la proie des pires syncopes, celles-là même que mon pays révolu a connues et redoute, autant de nécroses dont on n'est jamais certain qu'elles seront suivies de genèse.[11]
>
> (Hubert Aquin, agent double, 11)

This, as Smart points out later, partially explains Aquin's fascination with the baroque, the deep subject of which is what Gide described as "la rivalité du monde réel et de la représentation que nous nous en faisons".[35]

Since his suicide in 1977, there has been intense debate about Aquin's politico-poetic project and its status: did Aquin succeed in making the transition he wrote about (although the point of arrival of that transition--New Quebec--remains unclear, unrealized) or, caught in the machination of cultural dialectics and his own aesthetic of échec, where he seemed to operate as the fractured and suicidal symbol of Quebec, did he fail tragically to create or live through that era of indeterminate transition?

Nicole Brossard's appropriation of Aquin's literary techniques expresses that same agony, the same impossibilité d'habiter. But she refuses tragedy, signifying by her disjunctive discourse that she is elsewhere (je suis ailleurs), that her fiction will not turn upon the writer, but upon language and reality, and break it open, ehnace its negative capability. As Ricardou writes in Pour une théorie du nouveau roman:

> Si donc, comme on l'a maintes fois noté, la littérature nous fait mieux voir le monde, . . . c'est dans l'exacte mesure où, loin d'en offrir un substitut, une image, une représentation, elle est capable, en sa textualité, de lui opposer la différence d'un tout autre système d'éléments et de rapports.
>
> (Pour une théorie du nouveau roman, 23-24)

In "L'épreuve de la modernité" (1980) Brossard applauds the subversion of the tenacious fiction of linear narrative by textual practices that for "the last thirty years" have "assumed the shape of modern thought"; a shape that, as J. E. Cirlot and many others would argue, transcribes a pattern of thought much older than our century.[36] This is Brossard's tentative description of the shape she sees emerging from much of contemporary writing:

> Je retiens que cette expérience excitante du texte qui tourne autour de lui-même, tel qu'en lui-même il se porte, suggère à la fois l'excès, le cercle et le vide. Je dis cercle, car il me semble qu'en voulant briser la linéarité, on a comme été forcé à son contraire: tourner en rond, comme si le texte était venu à conclure sur lui-même, fût-il éclaté.
>
> De l'excès, du cercle (comme somme des fragments accumulés par les ruptures répétées) et du vide, j'en traduirais les effets au féminin par un glissement de sens allant de l'excès au délire, du cercle à la spirale et du vide à l'ouverture comme solution de continuité.[37]

The spiral becomes a figure not only of flight from closure (whether formal, semantic or ontological) and the linear fiction, but also one of migration: not Aquin's tragic descending spiral, but an ascending, intensely epiphanic figure that finally elucidates the telos of her transgressive, deconstructionist feminist aesthetic.

The global movement of Brossard's poetic is against the closed, cyclical repetition of the real and the strangulation of what Roman Jakobson, in an essay about Mayakovsky, called poetic language;

that is, language which continually destabilizes society and its ossified semiotic systems by proffering alternative formulations of reality, human existence and the shared world.[38] The strategies she deploys against the Logos of the Father and his eye are a determined attempt to exit from the scene of a fatal dialogue between him and those he dominates, through dérive and various types of incoherent, irrecuperable counter-gestures and fugal counterproposals learned from the avant-garde.

Critics have sometimes aligned her writing with elements of the early avant-garde. In "'Je est une autre': Nicole Brossard au Canada anglais" Barbara Godard points to the common heritage of Brossard and the anglophone writers associated with Open Letter and Coach House Press:

> Brossard les rejoint dans une perspective internationale, qui est le résultat d'un héritage Dada-surréaliste et d'un vif intérêt pour la théorie de l'information, pour le formalisme russe, le structuralisme français chez les écrivains contemporains. Une écriture spéculaire soumet à l'analyse des formes, images et structures pour donner naissance à des formes hybrides d'où disparaissent les distinctions traditionnelles entre la poésie et la prose, le littéraire et le non-littéraire, le visuel et le sonore dans le poème concret. La révolution par le langage (verbal et non-verbal) . . . .[39]

In a short, perceptive article, "Surréalisme et modernité", the Quebecois critic Jacques Michon analyzes the relationship between Brossard's writing and surrealist discourse, showing how she draws upon and modifies techniques found in the literary documents of that movement to subvert language and decompose imagery.[40] But there has been as yet no sustained study of Brossard's debt to Surrealism and the postures of other avant-garde movements of the early twentieth

century. Traces of those influences are clearly evident in her imagery (her appropriation of the electrical and vegetal imagery found in Breton's writing); her aesthetics (particularly her conception of desire, the nature and function of Eros, the imagination and the irrational); and the techniques that shape her literary practice and her rhetoric (an aggressive, disjunctive polemic descended from the manifestos and programmes of Dada and French Surrealism).

Dada has too often been dismissed as an artistic fraud, a simple manifestation of wartime hysteria. It can be more fully understood as a phenomenon that introduced a critical caesura into the cultural history of the West, a necessary rupture: one critic has called Dada "the chiaroscuro of culture"; in a more speculative, Jungian mood, one might perhaps be inclined to see it as the eruption of the shadow of occidental culture.[41] In The Theory of the Avant-garde Renato Poggioli argues that the avant-garde art of the early twentieth century arose out of a "common psychological condition" (4), one permeated with malaise, a consciousness of the degradation and constriction of human possibility that had reached a point of crisis; a sense that, as Breton wrote, "l'existence est ailleurs".[42-43] Three types of reactions to that intolerable situation were possible: agonism, revolt, or silence. If the artist did not choose to be silent, he could embrace the technological and psychological forces that threatened to break down the old world, evolving a corrosively scataological and entropic anti-art. Or, "fleeing toward a world at last inhabitable", the artist could seek the transformation of the

world through a new art and/or political agitation.[44]

In the avant-garde aesthetics of the period, literature was understood as being a subset of a larger cultural system in which certain frames of reference, values, attitudes, and thought processes were shared and perpetuated. This cultural system engendered an artistic tradition and a society which mutually legitimated and reinforced one another. The avant-garde, rejecting this society, was forced to evolve a counter-ideology:

> The psychic state directly controlled and expressed by an ideology is not so much individual or collective as it is the psychic state of a group. . . . Ideology, therefore, is always a social phenomenon. In the case of the avant-garde, it is an argument of self-assertion or self-defense used by a society in the strict sense against society in the larger sense.
>
> (The Theory of the Avant-garde, 4)

This counter-ideology often refused to assume the coherence of a counter proposition, a counter-matrice. The dadaists were adamant about this point: in his Manifeste dada 1918 Tristan Tzara stated: "Je suis contre les systèmes, le plus acceptable des systèmes est celui de n'en avoir par principe aucun".[45] Tzara, one of the masterminds of the Dada phenomenon, perceived, accurately, that the system of relations was what held any social system or world-view together, and that language was the essential ingredient that assured social cohesion.[46]

Tzara's visit to Paris in 1919 catalyzed the emergence of the nucleus of the Surrealist movement out of the Littérature group. Five years later, after having assimilated the important aspects of Dada (and subsequently rejecting it because of its unrelenting stance of pure nihilism), Breton published the first Manifeste du surréalisme.

In it he rails against the systematic impoverishment of reality by logic, arbitrary utility, and a diseased rationality, declaring that he believed in the future resolution of dream and reality in a type of absolute reality which he termed "surreality".[47] For him, the instrument of human emancipation was imagination, which alone offers some intimation of what can be, a way of recovering lost energy and vision that would expand the human sense of the real. This is what Breton means when he writes that the idea of Surrealism aims at the total recovery of psychic energy by a means which is "nothing other than the dizzying descent into the self, the systematic illumination of hidden inner places and the progressive darkening of other places which demands a perpetual excursion into the midst of forbidden territory".[48]

Imagination--the perpetual movement of consciousness toward the realization of its own potentialities, and what Blake called "unbounded perception"--is Brossard's own hard faith. In "Me couler douce l'échine" she writes:

> La necessité d'une imagination inépuisable, toujours disponible comme pour le plus troublant des spectacles d'animation. Pour que la vie ne meure. Pour que la raison renaisse autrement que conservatrice debordant le cadre séculaire de l'alternative.[49]

The consistent aim of surrealist art, writes one critic, has been to show the degree to which the world is porous to the imagination.[50] In his "Revolver à cheuveux blancs" Breton writes, "L'imaginaire est ce qui tend à devenir réel".[51] The entry found in the Dictionnaire général du surréalisme et de ses environs under the heading "Imagination" clarifies the implications of this rather cryptic statement:

> La déclaration de Breton . . . met en lumière ce qui permet le passage de l'un à l'autre de ces pôles, et qui n'est autre que l'imaginaire lui-même. À bien entendre, il faut dire que l'imaginaire est à la fois l'un des éléments à transmuter et le moteur de cette 'transmutation', à la fois 'la source et le torrent qu'on ne remonte pas' . . . et la puissance réalisatrice de l'imagination. Or, ce qui est à l'oeuvre dans cette 'tendance', ce mouvement de soi par soi qui s'impose 'spontanément, despotiquement' . . . n'est autre que le désir.[52]

Tiberghen's précis makes it clear that Breton's thought is not transcendental, as some of his detractors have claimed. Absolute reality (the plane of surreality) is contained entirely within the human consciousness; imagination catalyses the dialectical synthesis of the real and the unreal (l'irréel) while itself undergoing transmutation, so that both the perceiving consciousness and the existent world acquire negative capability, old oppositions ultimately giving way to new relations. Herein lies, for both Breton and Brossard, the possibility of reinventing the world. Again, from "Me couler douce l'echine":

> L'oeil et le corps en tant que réseau unique créant une disponibilité perpétuelle au changement d'attitude. Nouvelle lecture, pensée d'abondance, suivant le cours de l'en train de se faire, attentive à l'émergence de rélations inédites, d'opérations insoupçonnés rendues possibles . . . comme si le monde permuté avait soudainement dans la mémoire balayé d'éclairs la platitude des mondes enchassés, des mondes d'écrins.[53]

What directs the movement of the imagination in the surrealist schema is, Tiberghen notes, desire and the irrational energy of Eros which denies the duality of mind/body and causes the fusion of self and other. One critic observes that Surrealists exalt love as the archetypical act because it brings about this seemingly impossible fusion of the self with otherness, because, as the supreme

manifestation of the pleasure principle, it subverts a degrading dualism, causing the interpenetration of the potential and the real, the literal and the metaphorical.[54]

Desire also directs the imagination in Brossard's aesthetic. In "Préliminaires", the editorial introduction to the special 1975 issue of La Barre du Jour on women and language, she defines desire as having a project, or, alternately, as the by-product of having a project. Desire, defined as the need to actualise "rêves, fantasmes et désirs, et fait, tout l'enjeu de la fiction", implicitly points to some lack (manque) in reality.[55] Consciously assumed, desire prompts the individual and the collectivity to acts of transgression or "wandering" (errance, dérive). Desire is at once the origin of writing, the site of a modified world (un monde inédit), that which causes the emptying and the renewal of human thought, the fusion of self and other, the dissolution of a "decadent binary world" (Journal intime, 9).

Like Barthes in his later poststructural phase, Brossard cultivates desire and textual pleasure as a means to deconditioning and escape, textual and sensual pleasure fusing into an oceanic, undifferentiated eroticism that teaches alternate forms of knowledge and perception. Brossard, characteristically, works in the area in between pleasure and bliss (as Barthes defines them); her text "embraces" the reader, surrounding him with "infra-language" that disorients and consequently detaches the individual from reality (textually, from stable subjects, referents and significations), translating the text and the reader to a utopic plane located in the fissured white realm between language and thing; l'envers blanc du

réel. This is not Barthes' atopia, the place midway between utopia and the void, the lateral space of matte phenomena, the place where meaning is infinitely deferred; it is the utopian île found in Amantes, a place of recueillement, of preparation for a return to the real, for greater wholeness (since the author and reader have gone outside or beyond the divisive structures of the culture).

> dernier jour dans l'île: la rigueur
> amoureuse a pris son sens et ses nombres
> les vigilantes séductions convoquent
> à la concentration (tout est si concret,
> la jouissance comme un processus qui mène
> à l'intégrale: point de fragments)
> dans la fertile démarche des amantes
> (Amantes, 34)

In Brossard the surrealist cult of heterosexual eroticism and woman as mediator has given way to a woman-identified eroticism: where man sought integration through woman, woman now seeks wholeness through woman. The ontological implications of this egress of the Other will be explored later, in order to understand fully the consequences of Brossard's feminist aesthetic.

Brossard's formal and ideological debt to Dada and Surrealism is considerable. The "openness" or irresolution of her aesthetic and her cultural critique is descended from what Michel Sanouillet terms "the soft structure" of Dada, an anarchic strategy diametrically opposed to the rigid centralization and ideological codification of the later phase of the surrealist movement. Dada, he writes, being essentially movement and contradiction, can aptly be portrayed only by a fluid set of concepts.[56] Rudolf E. Kuenzli, in his essay "The Semiotics of Dada Poetry", analyzes Tzara's manifesto of 1918:

> Tzara's manifesto contains as its major theme the impossibility of writing a manifesto on Dada in conventional codes of language. . . . The whole manifesto consists of a series of contradictions, of 'conquering and disseminating'. Through the strategy of contradiction Tzara succeeds in deconstructing logic, common sense, and above all meaning. Only through the breaking of social codes is he able to suggest the inadequacy of the social sign system. . . .[57]

Kuenzli asserts that this activity was metasemiotic in nature, that the primary objective of Dada activity was the manipulation, the displacement and the explosion of the social signs of European society, and the subversion of the reception of conventional signs. Dada is a sustained attack upon the logocentrism of the culture (here logos is explored as "logic", but the other meanings of the word--speech, reason, the Word of God the Father--could equally apply). Kuenzli quotes Tzara: "[L]ogic is always wrong. It draws the threads of notions, words, in their formal exterior, toward illusionary ends and centers" (57).

Raoul Hausmann, writing about his own work, explains the thrust of Dada's artistic practice:

> Old art is construction, summary, absolutistically arranged around a center; new art is de-centering, destruction of the center, a dissolution. It will lead either to the complete end of art or to a completely new art, in which the presently naive longing to validate the world through the human will as human representation with the truth will be invalid, ineffective.[58]

One of the purely literary consequences of this aesthetic was the breakdown of the traditional categories of genre, and the rejection of normative poetics.

Dada and surrealist writing can arguably be seen as part of the trend toward generic writing that began in the late nineteenth century with the prose-poem, vers-libre, and other contestations of

the notion of genre. Assimilating the lessons of Futurism, dadaists and surrealists explored the use of language as aggressive gesture, using the principles of chance and incoherence to turn language back upon itself. This exposure of the arbitrary nature of the sign and the materiality of the physical substrata of the text are consistent strategies of Dada. The opacity and the potentially polysemic nature of the physical text could not be ignored or neutralized as the reader attempted to decode the text. Through the use of collage, cut-ups, idiosyncratic typography, multi-media experimentation, absent or eccentric syntax, avant-garde discourse became polysemic, nonlinear, ludic, troué, unconcluded, open. Narrative, the syntax of the old world, was, of course, suspect: in his manifestos Breton returns repeatedly to attack the implications of the narrative form encoded within the realistic novel: causality, rationality, analytic modes of knowledge, determined agents, finite and constricted worlds. Such disruptions of the conventions of narrative and paginal syntax forced the reader to participate in the construction of textual significance, although he was often caught between two dissonant semiotic systems: the purely linguistic and the purely visual.

Repetition (in the visual sense, the reproduction of signs or images) was a primary principle of dadaist and surrealist rhetoric. In their political communiqués, the reiteration of signs, images and syntactic structures was used aggressively, deployed against the cultural content of shared semiotic systems. The defamiliarization of the sign through repetition or atomization caused the breakdown of meaning into nonsense. Later surrealist poetry intensified the exploration of the polysemic and generative aspects of language, the

contextual transmutation of signs. Robert Desnos' "automatic poem" "Rrose Sélavy" is indicative of the trend of some avant-garde poets towards "generative grammar" or "generative language":

Rrose Sélavy

Rose aisselle a vit.
Rr'ose, essaie là, vit.
Rots et sel à vie.
Rose S, L, have I.
Rosée, c'est la vie.
Rrose scella vît.
Rrose sella vît.
Rrose sait la vie.
Rrose, est-ce, hélas, vie?
Rrose aise héla vît.
Rrose est-ce ail, est-ce elle?
Est celle
AVIS[59]

The radical disorientation of the receiving consciousness was the goal of both Surrealist and dadaist activity. In Languages of revolt: Dada and surrealist literature and film Inez Hedges asserts that, viewed from the perspective of cognitive theory, these movements were involved in the destruction of old language (or perceptual and cognitive frames), and in the tentative creation of new ones:

> The frame-breaking mechanisms of dadaist and surrealist works underscore their dialogical form, according to which they simultaneously restate and question the frame expectations their readers or viewers brought to them. Although this may be true in some sense for all works of art, the aesthetic experience called forth by dadaist and surrealist works operates within a more radical disjunction: it aims at the ultimate destruction of the frame itself, transforming the perceiver's initial recuperative gesture into one of creative-frame-making (through the creation of new genres, through metaphor . . .). Ultimately, the

> dialogical form of the relation between the work and the recipient extends beyond the work itself into the world. The incessant questioning that dadaist and surrealist works demand of their perceivers constitutes an injunction to them to alter their perception of reality.[60]

Very simply put, the conscious goal of Dada and Surrealism was the subversion of old ways of organizing and processing information into a world; it was, finally, the subversion of the world's discourse.

In Quebec, as Barbara Godard observes, the lessons of the surrealists have been particularly well assimilated by poets; particularly Roland Giguère, Claude Gauvreau, and Paul-Marie Lapointe. They had "extended" written language with the integration of a visual "sign" language. This strategy, in conjunction with their experiments into automatic writing, allowed them to flee "the trap of discursive logic and linear syntax". Godard singles out Brossard as evidence that the lessons of surrealism have been absorbed through these earlier Quebecois poets and transmitted to the writers of her generation.[61]

Extremely strong traces of surrealist thought and discourse are found in Brossard's aesthetic, as well as in her creative and critical works. Her discourse is full of various types of disjunctions and omission which level the hierarchy of the sentence, leaving a field of "infra-language", or what might be called "opened prose": this usage du trou, neologisms, dangling participial constructions, ambiguous pronoun references, and elliptical periodic constructions suggest meaning, while refusing to explicitly formulate or crystallize any one coherent "meaning".[62] In her critical works, the programmatic intensity of her voice, her use of the imperative mode and the present tense, the insistent reptitions and parallel constructions, the use of

"found objects" (advertisements, slogans, graffiti) inserted into her discourse, the strategy of "ideological capsules" rather than systematic argument, point to her assimilation of avant-garde rhetoric. In "Subversion is the Order of the Day" Caroline Bayard analyses the disruptive grammatical operations Brossard performs upon language in her poetry (which occur in her prose as well):

> First of all, the syntactic foundations of this text have exploded into disconnected units. Verb, predicate, article, adverb--each element has been displaced, or misplaced, and even an obstinate reader, tempted to re-establish this order, will fail to do so. There is no grammatically sound order . . . . Conjunctions and adverbs linking clauses are missing, are used in such a way as to make them look obsolete.[63]

The text literally becomes a decentred field where the reader experiences semantic anxiety, or, as Charron put it, "controlled delirium". This is Bayard's second observation.

> All punctuation has been banished; the reader becomes prey to great uncertainties as the visual necessity to discern logical clusters of words becomes too pressing.
>
> This shaken syntax produces a variety of possible word clusters, henceforth a range of possible meanings. Quite simply, the semantic direction of this text is closely dependent upon the number of units one chooses to permit in a given clause, upon the way the eye uses blanks or ignores them.[64]

Here the reader becomes, as Jacques Michon observes, a <u>lecteur-scripteur</u> who is forced to become aware of the mechanisms of thought, and the ways in which he has been taught to make meaning as he re-writes the text he is reading.[65]

Theoretically, this contextual fragmentation of significance engenders a modified imaginative space. The opened text "laisse filtrer le désir. . . . ainsi le désir qui est fuite en avant 'fleuve sans retenu virage', instaure un nouvel espace (blanc, neutre) dans

les mots eux-mêmes, créant ainsi la possibilité de nouvelles coïncidences, d'un nouveau langage. . . ."[66] It is here that Brossard (and the surrealists in their time) part company from Dada: where Dada exploded sign systems in order to expose the absurdity and void they obscured, Brossard and the surrealists move toward the openings their discourse has made in the world's discourse, rending the horizon of consciousness. This "diaspora and migration of signs" towards the white underside of the real will, Brossard believes, allow a new language to emerge out of the old, and female being to enter into the world through this new language.

This is why she insists that her texts are not autotelic, but, as she puts it, "ideograms": symbols used in a system of writing to represent a thing or an idea; signs that point to the emergence of figures inédites while being the very ground from which they emerge.[67] This embrace of the principle of absence brings this study to an exploration of aspects of her feminist, post-existential ontology.

The concepts of the self, of being, of the void and energy found in Brossard emerge from a radical and eclectic synthesis of elements of existentialism, the feminist ontology of the American philosopher Mary Daly, strains of oriental cosmology, and what is now being called "New Age" thought.[68]

Brossard, in Amantes, writes that the search for identity, for knowledge of the self, is always precipitated by some disruption or failure of meaning:

> je cherche ici à écrire je en explorant tous les mécanismes qui servent à distraire ce jeu (permanent et inexploré) car tu as bien vu dans ton texte de projet que rien ne s'écrit de l'identité sans cette motivation-mobile comme l'on dit

> d'un sens aux aguets ou d'un sense bousculé, renversé sur lui-même.
>
> (Amantes, 18)

Four years later, in the preface to her Journal intime, she offers this view of the situation of the occidental sujet:

> D'une manière contemporaine occidentale, le sujet surgit tautologique et ne pourra avoir de sens, c'est-à-dire, un rayonnement imagé et imaginaire que relancé dans un monde effrayant/extatique et qui pourtant ne sera pas binaire. La survie du sujet est tridimensionnelle et le sujet perd un temps fou de désespoir à se morfondre de nostalgie devant le deuil pluriel d'un ordre symbolique désuet.[69]

She continues:

> Le sujet vit dans l'encombrement des signifiants. . . . Le sujet ne résiste plus à la propagande du sujet. Il est partout à la fois: en manuscrit, en photocopie, en livre, en note, il clignote au bout de la ligne sur l'écran cathodique. Le sujet est conscient de tout ce dont il n'a pas encore idée. Immobilisé dans la synthèse qu'il fait de lui-même, le sujet est pourtant au comble du discernement, attentif, le mot sur le bout de la langue: mais on ne voit que le mouvement lent de sa bouche qui souffre du vide, vraiment comme une comparaison et seulement en comparaison.
>
> (Journal intime, 9-10)

Absence has been the essential experience of woman. In L'Amèr Brossard periodically removes the silent e from the end of words, or from the syllables of other words, to mark the absence of the feminine in certain activities or concepts: laboratoir, m`re. These are signs that inscribe (by excision) woman as consigned to the role of unarticulated absence, as generic Other, as the forcibly passive object (a woman, writes de Beauvoir, is someone who watches herself being watched), the mediating mirror in an ontology that splits her in two, into silence. Interned by this matrix, she is an ontological hole. This is eloquently demonstrated by an excerpt from Jean-Paul Sartre's L'être et le néant in which he offers an existential

psychoanalysis of the hole as a symbol of an intolerable mode of being:

> On voit tout de suite, qu'il [le trou] se présente originellement comme un néant 'à combler' avec ma propre chair: l'enfant ne peut se tenir de mettre son doigt ou son bras entier dans le trou. Il me présente donc l'image vide de moi-même; je n'ai qu'à m'y couler pour me faire exister dans le monde qui m'attend. L'idéal du trou est donc l'excavation qui se moulera soigneusement sur ma chair, de manière que, en m'y gênant et en m'y adaptant étroitement, je contribuerai à faire exister le plein d'être dans le monde. Ainsi, boucher le trou, c'est originellement faire le sacrifice de mon corps pour que la plénitude d'être existe. . . . Nous saisissons là, à son origine, une des tendances les plus fondamentales de la réalité humaine: la tendance <u>à remplir</u>.

He then turns his attention to the psychological dynamics of "human sexuality" (heterosexuality), and the ontological status of woman:

> . . . l'obscénité du sexe féminin est celle de toute chose <u>béante</u>: c'est un <u>appel d'être</u>, comme d'ailleurs tous les trous: en soi la femme appelle une chair étrangère qui doive la transformer en plénitude d'être par pénétration et dilution. Et inversément la femme sent sa condition comme un appel précisément parce qu'elle est trouée.[70]

This fundamentally dichotomous view of human being in which man is being and woman absence has two consequences, as Pierre Nepveu argues in his sensitive essay "Nicole Brossard: notes sur une écologie": a self-consuming society (what he describes as <u>autophagie</u>) and a blocked energy flow that becomes an energy crisis.[71] He goes on to point to the relationship between Brossard's formalism and the overcoming of the cultural fatigue felt in Quebec during the 1950s and 1970s, how her writing, as it displaces the issue of cultural energy inward, towards the <u>sujet</u>, paradoxically dilates the cultural question. As Nepveu remarks, it is not enough to speak or to act; one must understand what is at stake inside one's self when one speaks or acts, one must return to the origins of one's <u>force</u> (strength, power, force)

or the lack of it. In this manner the issue of Quebec's cultural fatigue gives way to the feminist issue in Brossard's writing; and, as Nepveu observes, the feminist issue gives way to (if the phrase can be permitted) cultural ontology: the study of the manipulation of the self and the energy of being.

> . . . il faut plutôt voir que le formalisme de Brossard a été le moyen nécessaire pour déplacer la question de l'énergie vers le sujet, de l'intérioriser au maximum, de réduire tout le paysage à cet enjeu. Au commencement, il n'y a plus un lieu, une histoire, une parole, il y a l'énergie, la force psychique-physique soumise au cycle des contractions et de l'expansion, il y a un immense vide qui est en même temps un immense potentiel de mouvement, de trajectoires, de souffles et de rythmes.[72]

This vide of which Nepveu writes is the "essenceless" self. It is the void, the hors-texte embraced and claimed by Brossard as the very core of herself. In L'Amèr she suggests that this self is found through writing and the bodies of other women: "J'écris pour ne pas vous [her child and her lover] abîmer vos corps et pour y trouver mon vide, mon centre" (11). In a more polemical tone in Le sens apparent she writes an apology for the void, her imagery establishing the contiguity of the self, the void, and female being:

> les trous sont blancs ou noirs je dis que le trou est lumineux et que les liens se nouent en son centre nerveux, causés par l'intensité du spectre, l'exubérance des métaphores la décharge la dérive: le déjà vu, l'inédit, le tissu respiratoire, l'usure du délire tac là réalité identique avec ses contours ses cernes[73]

This suite of statements, analyses and counterstatements has implicitly set a number of problems, namely: how to have woman accede to the status of sujet if she has been void; how to create an image of the female self and body finally emancipated from its historic

negativity; how to put an end to the fictionality of female being and allow the induction of that mode of being into reality. Brossard's writing has already put forward some responses to those problems. Here the essay "E muet mutant" must be returned to study.

"E muet mutant" is one of the two published texts Brossard has placed under the sign of Rimbaud. Its epigraph is taken from Rimbaud's letter to Paul Demeny, dated the fifteenth of May, 1871:

> Quand sera brisé l'infini servage de la femme, quand elle vivra pour elle et par elle, l'homme--jusqu'ici abominable, --lui ayant donné son renvoi, elle sera poète, elle aussi! La femme trouvera de l'inconnu! Ses mondes d'idées différéront-ils des nôtres? Elle trouvera des choses étranges, insondables, repoussantes, délicieuses; nous les prendrons, nous les comprendrons.[74]

It has been established that in Brossard's reading of the culture, woman has historically been an object and yet an absence, a peon acted upon and defined by the fictions tattooed upon her very being, her enforced silence. Although the voice is an organ of the imagination (as Barthes observed), Brossard rejects the romance and nostalgia of the idea of parole. Female speech, being "belated" in related to male discourse, is largely confined to the parameters of that anterior discourse, and cannot "transmit" itself.

> Parole censurée par excellence. Parole confinée. Condamnée à tourner en rond, à se clore sur elle-même dans la mesure où elle n'entre pas dans l'histoire. . . . Parole répétitive, fondée sur le zéro de la tradition qui se transmet, ainsi va la vie. Parole baroque, rococo, pleines de fioritures; qui se dépense en pure perte d'énergie qui ne transforme rien. Parole qui se contredit. . . .
>
> Sa parole est sans importance, sans avenir. . . . Sa parole marche derrière le Discours comme une femme qui suit son homme. Elle est sans prise sur le réel. Elle se configure au rêve, au délire, à la folie. Monologue, elle n'attend pas de réponse. . . .
>
> Parole iceberg.
>
> (in Double Impression, 52-54)

To become a sujet, one must write: in Rimbaldian terms, the woman must become a poet. The graffiti written on the walls of underpasses and military bases, the paraphs spray-painted on subway cars, the appeals and private messages found on bridges, literally scrawled upon existing institutions, are not a contre-écriture, they are a contra-diction, a saying against. These phenomena are forms of speech, gestures of revolt that attempt to inscribe both one's existence and that revolt. But because they lie outside the accepted channels of social discourse they are doomed to erasure. To become a sujet, one must gain access to the channels of collective discourse and affirm the self and its experiential reality as real, as significant.[75] To write is (in Heideggerean terms) to pull oneself into being and inscribe woman in the "trajectory of the species". It is also, as Sartre's analysis of the imagination implies, an act of negation, one that can disturb the existing cultural semiotic systems and empty signs of their cultural content. Writing is also an act of "warfare", or, as Brossard graphically describes it, the act of the prey turning upon its assassins: "Le pensum tragique de la proie qui médite sur sa fuite et qui soudain vire et fait face, qui entre dans le combat, pour sauver sa peau, l'horizon de sa peau, le creux de sa chair, le temps de son récit. L'autonomie flagrante. Conflagration" (Double Impression, 63). Having withdrawn from the metaphysical function assigned to her, Brossard's aesthetic embraces the ontological status of woman as hole and makes it the fundamental precept of her writing.

> Car ce qui peut être dit de la femme qui écrit et de son écriture agit forcément dans le sens de la multiplication des vides, des creux. Nous entrons par l'écriture dans un

> terrain vaste et vague où le tout luit et se reflète (éviter le fond de teint). Les mots sont huileux, sur la vague qui meurt, meurt et ment passionnément avec tous les alibis de la passion.
>
> (Double Impression, 58)

Voids, holes, vertigo. Two types of vertigo are found posited in Brossard's writing. There is the vertige vertical, associated with blood-system imagery, desire, the colour red, aggression, progress; it is the existential nausea precipitated by the experience of the void, absurdity, and human corruption. The vertige horizontal is a post-existential vertigo associated with ecstasy, the colour white, consciousness, being, éblouissement, felicity, l'indicible (the ineffable or that which cannot be expressed), the unforeseen, l'excès, openness, and possibility. In the vertige suite found in Amantes, an anonymous woman on top of a skyscraper in New York experiences or enacts a transition from vertical vertigo to the ecstatic horizontal vertigo, uncovering the figure of the spiral as a counterproposal to the unilinear vector-story of the projective consciousness. Here are the two intermediate sections of the suite:

> vertige 2
>
> du vertige et de sa forme, ce qui se rapporte aux confins des conflits, mais du vertige ou des surfaces: prise dans un tourbillon, croyant que tout tourne autour d'elle sans comprendre pourquoi elle ne tourne pas. présume alors que l'univers est cycle et rotation. mais contrairement à ses attentes, le monde défile/devant elle tout à fait en ligne droite selon la loi de l'héritage patriarcal. en mouvement, et s'aperçoit qu'autour d'elle rien ne tourne; prise alors d'un inconcevable vertige
>
> vertige 3
>
> dans l'espace plein de miroitements: vertige inédit. éblouie/tentée/et/ravie. tous ses sens travaillent pour elle à lui faire plaisir et lui donnent à penser une version de l'existence qui suppose un déplacement de l'horizon. ce n'est qu'une fois devenue vigilante qu'elle constate que le vertige de convention a fait place à l'éblouissement[76]

In a footnote to his existential psychoanalysis of holes in L'être et le néant, Sartre casually remarks: "Il faudrait noter aussi l'importance de la tendance inverse, la tendance à percer des trous, qui demanderait à elle seule une analyse existentielle" (705). Since the action of penetrating the plane of the hole is necessarily a movement from one plane to another, or one state to another, the action could be described organically as one approaching a helical motion. One potential point of departure for this analysis could be an investigation of the ancient symbolic meaning of holes and spirals.

In his A Dictionary of Symbols J. E. Cirlot describes the symbolic charge of the hole.[77] The hole, he writes, is a very important symbol of fertility and openness: on the biological level, it stands for the opening of this world onto other worlds, the "gateway of the world" which the soul has to cross in order to be released from the cycle of karma (149). The spiral is understood as a schematic image of the evolution of the universe: in the Egyptian system of hieroglyphs the spiral (which corresponds to the Hebraic vau) denotes cosmic forms in motion, or the relationship between unity and multiplicity. The spiral is found in three forms--expanding (as in the nebula), contracting (as in the whirlpool), or ossified (as in the snail's shell). In the most ancient traditions, Cirlot continues, there is always a distinction between the creative spiral, which rises in a clockwise direction, and the destructive spiral, which moves in a counter-clockwise motion. The spiral may also conceivably symbolize the relationship between the circle and the centre, and represent the idea of the "potential centre":

> . . . the spiral is associated with the idea of the dance, and especially with primitive dances of healing and incantation, when the pattern of movement develops as a spiral curve. Such spiral movements (closely related to the pattern of the mandala . . .) may be regarded as figures intended to induce a state of ecstasy and to enable man to escape from the material world and to enter the beyond, through the 'hole' symbolized by the mystic Centre.
> (A Dictionary of Symbols, 306)

The spiral describes the movement of the world, the mind and women's writing, as Brossard understands them. In the final section of the spirale suite, she states:

> l'expérience infligée au corps des femmes incite à la réalité_____ce silence prolongé mais trace evidente de la spirale en situation, contemporaine et radicale. ça couve quelque part en ce siècle: . . . L'espèce de femme arrive montrant le bout du sein comme pour signifier le commencement d'un cycle. que personne ne bouge en cet instant tout peut vertige devenir virtuelle
> (Amantes, 90)

It is the figure of the cycle of existence opened by the imagination. In Le Sens apparent the spiral appears as the figure of the movement of mind, energy and imagination found in the writing of many women. As in Bateson's and Daly's work, the spiral is conceived of as a figure of evolution in Brossard's texts:

> . . . ma pensée: attentive aux mouvements qui se déroulent en spirale dans les livres écrits par des femmes. J'étais comme saisie par la logique interne qui appelle sans cesse des femmes à se fondre/ à s'expulser de la forme première du coquillage, emportant avec elles le rythme et le bruit des vagues, se répétant, se modulant, s'arrachant des eaux; fertiles et assidues dans le cycle des naissances et de la renaissance.
> (Le Sens apparent, 14)

It is used to express the movement of reality in almost occult terms:

> Le motif de la spirale s'ouvre sur de l'inédit. Et l'inédit circule, circule, produisant des émanations comme il en est aux portes d'une voie initiatique. . . . La ligne dans

> toute sa rondeur, ses courbes de vie, sa courbe de mots et beaucoup de gravité si par hasard un flot d'anecdotes venait à trancher la réalité au sort comme pour mieux le maîtriser.
> (Le Sens apparent, 14-15)

The spiral is one of the figures found at the epicentre of Brossard's discourse. The other crucial figure is le centre blanc (the white centre). Critics have differed upon the interpretation of this figure. In Poésie des frontières Clément Moisan offers an interpretation informed by existentialism:

> Ce centre blanc, c'est encore le rien, précisé par l'idée de la mort qui domine dans la majorité des poèmes. Ce centre blanc est aussi la personne humaine, ce foyer d'énergie defini par ses manifestations et finalement intégré dans une structure énergétique qui le domine, mais demeurant tout de même ce centre blanc, une substance neutre ou neutralisée.
> (Poésie des frontières, 234)

This perception of the white centre is elaborated later in the study. It is seen as "un lieu de référence vide" (239), as a still centre in which nothing happens but everything happens around it, at "l'extrémité des raies de la sphère" (239). In "Nicole Brossard, écrivain classique" François Charron offers another interpretation of the white centre in a characteristically ironic and yet passionate manner:

> Il y a bien un centre, oui, mais il est blanc (toute comme cette encre blanche et cette blanche mémoire). Ce n'est pas très sérieux ce centre. C'est le O de l'ouvert, de l'écho, du zéro, du sexe qui bouge, trouant de partout. De la jouissance, de l'incentrable. . . . déjouant la soumission qui nous cramponne aux valeurs et à leurs culpabilisations.[78]

In a paper read at the same symposium, Louise Dupré gave another analysis of the white centre found in Brossard's writing. Dupré suggests that this figure has been a constant in Brossard's image-repertoire: it first appears as "le centre atomique" in one of her early collections of poetry, l'écho bouge beau (1968), then is

referred to as the centre from which "meaning springs" in her next volume of poetry (Suite logique, 1970). It emerges as the white centre from this time onward. In her paper, Dupré conjoins the spiral and this white centre in her analysis of Brossard's literary practice:

> Elle énonce des théories pour les décentrer, les dépasser, agrandissant de cercle en cercle l'ouverture de la spirale. . . . Car elle est exploratrice, cette écriture qui défait, invente, voyage, nous entraîne dans ses ruptures et mutations.[79]

Rather than emphasizing the cosmological implications of the centre, Dupré chooses to describe its nature and function in relation to the sujet, privileging the inward processes that render the sujet-centre mobile (movable, detachable, floating, changeable, quick) and open: "'le centre blanc' . . . espace in-fini, jamais clos, s'ouvrant toujours davantage, le point final sans cesse écarté sous la poussée du mot. Mouvement d'aller-retour, concentrique/excentrique, car 'le cycle est centre'".[80]

Brossard's own explanation of this white centre and the various blancs found in her writing calls to mind Mallarmé's later poetry, and reminds one that the struggle to integrate the principle of absence, and, finally, silence, is a poetic project extending back to the last century in the occidental tradition. What began as an artistic problem slowly evolved, matured, and then began to open, showing itself to be in its most highly developed phase a generic ontological problem that has forced contemporary writers towards silence, notation, repetition, deconstruction, or, very rarely, towards a vision.

> De toute manière, on ne peut jamais tout dire. Il y a des blancs. Les blancs sont inévitables. En peinture, en musique, en écriture le blanc est de rigueur. Le blanc est indissociable et de la fiction et de la réalité. C'est par le blanc que nous amorçons la circonstance d'écriture comme pour entrer dans l'invisible de nos pensées. D'autres appellent blanc le vide qu'il nous faut remplir afin de s'initier à la société. Ou encore blanc, la vibrante luminosité qu'on finit un jour par décomposer dans le vif des couleurs anecdotiques. Blanc de l'absence, blanc de la somme. C'est toujours à recommencer, comme un jour certain que l'on observerait, quand, jour férié, quand le monde est décousu autour de nous.
>
> (Journal intime, 57-58)

Here the profound harmony between self (and its gestures), cosmos and void begins to emerge from Brossard's almost buddhistic cosmology. It is an understanding of self and the world as being the necessary and fecund interpenetration and mirroring of two voids, two pulsating transformational centres.[81] The spiral, being the figure of their interrelation, the evolutionary pattern of world and self, constitutes a third potential centre (le cycle est centre). From this vista, the ontology and the constructs of history, telos, possession, closure of the projective consciousness become untenable. In Brossard's counter-cosmology, imagination and desire are the forces that pull the individual into and out of the void-centre, causing the tidal dissolution and recreation of cultural and ontological matrices. Her aesthetic is necessarily contained within this cosmology, and it is not hard to see how traditional aesthetics privileging closure, universality and the "luminous silent stasis" of the art object are shattered by an aesthetic of process, transgression and erasure; an aesthetic allied to the double spiral, descended from the metasemiotic activity of the avant-garde.

And this aesthetic gives rise to a literary practice that

seeks to exceed its textual, linguistic, and semantic premises. As Merleau-Ponty remarked in "On the Phenomenology of Language", the consequences of speech and perception always exceed their premises, causing the decentring and the expansion of human subjectivity and language.[82] New meanings come to be when speech (the expression of human subjectivity) recentres the language encompassing the subject. This recentring, writes Merleau-Ponty, takes not only the speaking subject but also the receiving subject through a decisive step, a Nachvollzug that contracts the steps of the recentring process into a single view. Here "sedimentation" occurs, and both the speaker and receiving subject will be able to "think farther".[83]

Merleau-Ponty's analysis of the dynamics of speech effectively summarizes the whole of Brossard's artistic project. Embracing the principles of flux, desire, imagination, lucidity, and the alternately centrifugal and centripetal movements of mind and world, she is attempting to effect a series of syntheses that will decentre language and culture and recentre them in such a way that their matrices, tentatively constituted, will allow the figure inédit of female being to emerge.

Brossard's discourse can be situated within the movement of literature against itself, and seen as a white parricidal writing rooted in the anti-tradition of the avant-garde. Her radical and metasemiotic aesthetic is the conscious assumption and exploration of writing by a woman who has seen herself seen as void and ontological hole within the matrices and the game-space of consensual reality.

Her discourse is one that allies itself with the void and the tidal movement of being and nonbeing, shelling the static matrix of the Father with ambiguity, relativity, dismantled structures, and Spengler's odd poetic truth. She knows that the walls do not fall. They open onto the potential landscape of female being, the utopian counter-continent found in the final section of Amantes, a continent birthed out of the charged and metaphorical darkness of the New York City blackout.

What I have been trying to point to, simply, is this. Brossard's aesthetic grows out of the assimilation and the critique not only of elements of the continental tradition of philosophy (particularly Existentialism and Phenomenology), but also of elements of the political and the literary traditions of France and Quebec. Deconstructionist thought is married to a radically feminist and woman-identified sensibility, and grounded in an ontology that is definitely post-existential and highly influenced by buddhist thought. Her aesthetic is one that could most fairly be described as being a fusion of avantgardism and the visionary poeticism found in Blake and Rimbaud, her literary practice one committed to the idea of art as a form of "anti-destiny" (as Malraux once put it).

This is a radical rejection of the notion of enracinement held so dearly in the Quebecois literary and ideological traditions. Here the ideal of parole has become a radical écriture of possibility, and pays has become the place of female being.[84] This is, in short, a rejection of the determinism and the tragedy of history and the past.

It is a rejection, a refusal to assume the burden of cultural fatigue, a wager that other human possibilities remain viable. If it is the function of revolutions to renew time, then Brossard's discourse must be seen as an attempt to help precipitate the migration and evolution of human consciousness, an attempt to rend the horizons of consensual consciousness and human being with an edged and delirious poetry of anticipation.

CHAPTER THREE

SCHEHEREZADE SINGS IN A PRAIRIE BEER PARLOUR AT THE END OF THE WORLD (OR, WHAT THE CROW MEANT)

> We write mandalas toward
> a cosmology that cannot be located.
> Robert Kroetsch[1]

Anyone reading Robert Kroetsch's essays after a long, difficult submersion in Nicole Brossard's willfully difficult prose will notice immediately that in comparison to her texts, which are theoretical, speculative, programmatic and rather abstruse, Kroetsch's essays fall rather more comfortably into the field of Anglo-American thematic criticism. They are often occasional, and centre upon the examination of specific texts or issues found largely within the confines of the English-Canadian literary and cultural tradition.

Although his criticism is often thematic and sometimes confessional, his work is, both directly and indirectly, as Barbara Godard observes, a locus of deconstructive activity in Canadian criticism, and intimately associated with the rise of the continentally-influenced "new new criticism" in English-Canadian literary circles. Most of his essays were written after 1974, the year that Godard sees as a turning point in the evolution of English-Canadian criticism:

> 1974 is the moment when the critical debate crystal[l]ized. In English-Canada, as elsewhere, a debate was taking place over the death of the subject, between phenomenology and structuralism.[2]

The opening salvo was Frank Davey's essay "Surviving the Paraphrase", which attacked Frygian criticism, and indeed any criticism that was "referential", "thematic" or contextual. Godard elaborates the points of contention existing between Davey and the older schools of criticism:

> Davey also quarrels with these critics over a view of culture which fails to grant the autonomy of the artist and the work of art. System . . . is attacked in the name of process, system being characterized as conservatism, stability, crystal[l]ization, objectivity, while process is a chaos of contingency, accidental encounters, subjectivity. This 'phenomenology' offers the way out of the normative criticism Davey associates with Frye. . . .[3]

Kroetsch's essays are caught in the curious, shifting ground between phenomenology and poststructural thought, as is his aesthetic; an aesthetic that emerges gradually as he circles obsessively around a small number of issues in his writings, interviews, and his one published journal. In "Weathercock: The Directions of Report" Donna Bennett notes the peculiar relationship between his secondary texts and the evolution of his understanding of the nature and function of writing: "[m]any of Kroetsch's essays can be read, not only for their ostensible topics, but as critical dialogues, in which Kroetsch uncovers ideas that crystal[l]ize his own aesthetics".[4] A similar perception is found in the headnote of "Bordering On: Robert Kroetsch's Aesthetic" by Robert Lecker. Lecker remarks that Kroetsch's aesthetic theory has generally been treated as secondary to his poetry and his fiction, although a careful examination of that theory as it emerges from the body of his secondary writing "offers insight into the problems and paradoxes that inform Kroetsch's writing, and the dialectical tensions which Kroetsch sees as central to the Canadian

literary experience".[5]

Most of those tensions and concerns are disclosed in Frank Davey's introduction to the special 1983 issue of Open Letter devoted to the collection of Kroetsch's most significant essays and conference papers. These are, Davey writes, "eccentric" essays, "provocations." "Far from seeking logical coherence, they refuse to complete their implied arguments, . . . to build the implied system" (Essays, 7). Like Brossard, Kroetsch sees language as gesture, as an "enabling act," one that returns the essay to the "early moment of critical response and insight"; argument is replaced by a series of disjunctive, oracular perceptions, his crudely vital and punning discourse eschewing the authority and the language of traditional academic models (Essays, 7-9). Since these models and received discursive forms force semantic closure, Kroetsch "decenters" the text under examination "toward his own imagining", and cultivates dérive, deferral and various kinds of discontinuities within the body and the processes of his texts, so that ideas exist only "situationally" or "dramatically" (Essays, 8). Critically, he is in flight from the canon and "theological" readings of the "timeless textual object". Instead, he holds that the text is and must inevitably be misread; each reading reinvents the text, the text evolving apace with the evolution of the reader's sensibilities and perceptions, so that Kroetsch, reading literature in the context of his own history and place (Essays, 7), places himself in opposition to the Frygian model of criticism which involves itself in the elaboration of mythoi uncomfortably close (for Kroetsch) to the idea of archetype and essence, ultimately, to a closed and ordered imaginative world. Two statements from his 1981 essay "Beyond

Nationalism: a Prologue" sum up the thrust of his critical and his creative activity, and orient this investigation into his aesthetics:

> Our genealogies are the narratives of a discontent with a history that lied to us, violated us, erased us even. We wish to locate our dislocation, and to do so we must confront the impossible sum of our traditions. . . . we recognize that we can be freed into our own lives only by terrible and repeated acts of perception. . . .
>
> The words have changed meaning for the Canadian writer; the desires have multiplied their directions. The task of criticism, now, is to examine those changes and those new directions without recourse to an easy version of national definition, and without easy recourse to old vocabularies.[6]

Later in the paper (originally published as part of a special Mosaic issue entitled "The Canadian Literary Scene in Global Perspective"), he comments: "[t]his volume of essays is, spectacularly at times, a critical attempt to name, in the world's story-body, the recurrences and obsessions and strategies that become, in turn, the naming of a culture called Canada" (Essays, 88). By his own admission, Kroetsch's own obsession is precisely this necessary naming and unnaming of his world, this search for origin that is his initial poetic project.

The conceptual apparatus and methodologies employed by Kroetsch in his excavation of the past are singularly eclectic. As Godard observes, his critical sensibility has not evolved under the aegis of one system, but rather through the assimilation and agglomeration of elements of contemporary literary and philosophical theory. In "Other Fictions: Robert Kroetsch's Criticism" she formulates a "violent catalogue" of Kroetsch's sources who are often, she contends, significantly misread or re-presented in Kroetsch's discourse:

Heidegger: phenomenology
Saussure: structuralism
Todorov: structuralism
Barthes: post-structuralism
Foucault: deconstructionism
Iser: phenomenology
Derrida: deconstructionism
Bakhtin: carnival[7]

This appropriation of attractive elements of alternate conceptual and critical modes which conduct a sustained critique of essentialist or "theological" criticism is used by Kroetsch to flee from semantic closure and an ageing, coercive propositional language.

As a creative writer, Kroetsch has been subject to many labels and contradicting typologies: early in his career he was called a "regional writer", a "prairie writer", then later a parodist, a postmodernist, even a magic realist. He is, as Peter Thomas and other critics sympathetic to postmodernism contend, closest to being a fabulist who uses Canada as a "metaphorical field" located somewhere between dream and nightmare, a writer whose prose has great affinities with the stream of international writing involved in what John Barth terms the literature of exhaustion.[8]

Yet, however he might protest, Kroetsch's poetry and fiction is still forced to deal with the thematic issues of nineteenth-century Prairie realism: the problems of history, of place, displacement and absence. In Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature Erich Auerbach posits the existence of two basic types of realism. There is, first of all, the Homeric style, in which the basic impulse is the representation of psychological and objective phenomena in a "fully externalized form, visible and palpable in all their parts, and completely fixed in their spatial and temporal

relations".[9] There is, literally and psychologically, no perspective in this style, no play between a foreground and a background which might result in the present lying open to the depths of the past: the Homeric style knows only a foreground, only a uniformly illuminated, uniformly objective present" (7). This style is contrasted with Biblical realism. Analysing the Biblical account of the sacrifice of Isaac, Auerbach observes the ruptures, omissions and opacity of the story found in Genesis:

> . . . the externalization of only so much of the phenomena as is necessary for the purpose of narrative, all else left in obscurity; the decisive points of the narrative alone are emphasized, what lies between is nonexistent; time and place are undefined and call for interpretation; thoughts and feelings remain unexpressed, are only suggested by the silence and the fragmentary speeches; the whole . . . 'fraught with background'.
>
> (Mimesis, 11-12)

The barely submerged terror and the opacity of the world found in English-Canadian realistic prose leads me to think that indigenous realism inclines more toward Biblical realism than the Homeric style. Perhaps one of the most intriguing constants found in the subtext of this prose is the existence of a pattern or common deep structure: underneath the ostensibly realistic narrative of Martha Ostenso, F. P. Grove, W. O. Mitchell and even Hugh MacLennan, one can find again and again the mythoi of comedy and romance operating at a deep level, obliquely shaping the fictional world, causing it to be less real upon examination, but more resonant, more humanly significant. It seems that the people who were to become English-Canadians did not opt for the black steel tracks of architectonic fictions to subdue the land and establish themselves; rather, they chose the more tenuous and

vulnerable human structures of romance and comedy.

In Kroetsch's novels those patterns are not subtextual but raised up, exposed in an almost metatextual fashion by his fabulist sensibility. These patterns are fused with elements of other mythoi drawn from the "world's story-body", tentatively floated upon the raw material of story, then smashed, frustrated, interrupted, parodied or deconstructed by a narrator or implied author. Although Kroetsch is part of a later generation of writers for whom it is as necessary to discuss the impact of literature upon literature as it is the impact of the landscape upon the mind (and, hence, literature), his work still interrogates some of the most significant themes and formal strategies found in Prairie literature. This interrogation is largely conducted through the use of sophisticated formal techniques borrowed from the New Novel and the literature of exhaustion. And, interestingly, the comic mode serves to link this earlier lierature with the post-modern literary practice of Robert Kroetsch.

Kroetsch's prose is permeated by what he terms his "comic vision". In an interview with Russell Brown, he described it as a vision that "recognizes the importance of chance and absurdity much more than a tragic vision would. A tragic vision involves a sense of inevitability; the comic world contains sheer chance and the kinds of absurdities which are neither logical nor rational. . . . it's an agnostic vision, it's without belief, literally what agnostic seems to mean."[10] In conversation with Margaret Laurence, he said: "Comedy tells you that there is no cause and effect, that chance operates against it. The studhorse--it's not moral or immoral".[11]

It is significant that Kroetsch chooses to practice the

entropic and ironic low comedy of Beckett and other contemporaries, a corrosively centrifugal comedy contiguous with farce and burlesque. Such comedy is markedly different from the dianoia of traditional comedy derived from the Greeks. The traditional comic mode is essentially centripetal: in The Anatomy of Criticism, Frye writes that the global theme of the comic is the integration of society, an integration that generally takes the form of the incorporation of the protagonist into society, and ends in the crystallization of a new order around that protagonist.[12] That new order is precipitated by a wedding; hence the importance of the "erotic intrigue" (44) in the reconstruction of society in traditional comedy. These axioms are found inverted in Kroetsch's novels. The erotic intrigues found in these works are blocked less by societal censure than by the protagonist's own ambivalence and flight from the female principle; where traditional comic desire manages to overcome obstacles in order to form a new community in a "green world" (183), desire is in Kroetsch's novels solipsistic and finishes not in the creation of a new order, but in chaos. As one commentator observed to Kroetsch himself, the structures of his novels are apocalyptic: "in your case the leap is not redemptive, it's into the void. It's off the bridge."[13]

Kroetsch's comic stance is revealing in two regards. His discourse is one that frustrates the traditional comic union of characters and audience Frye observes in older comedy. Frye writes: "[A]s the final society reached by comedy is the one that the audience has recognized all along to be the proper and desirable state of affairs, an act of communion with the audience is in order" (164). In Kroetsch there is no plaudite, no invitation to the audience to

form part of the comic society. There is, instead, a heightened sense of alienation, and an abdication to cosmic terror. This type of comedy is, I think, reacting against the orthodox, centripetal comedy found in early English-Canadian fiction. It actively subverts the concept of society, and a legitimate order based upon human bonding by introducing the rather novel idea of cosmic absurdity and an overwhelming terror of the nature-woman-civilization triangle. His novels might perhaps be seen as a coda to the stream of nineteenth-century comic fiction, and a deconstruction of that mode. This context allows his major preoccupations--the problems of identity, survival, naming, persona, cosmic terror, the exercise of power, the tension between the questing individual and the community founded upon forced closures and resolutions, sham geographies and histories, the brittleness of the structures imposed upon nothingness--to echo and reverberate throughout the whole Prairie literary tradition. Kroetsch's work is violent notice that the optimistic and centripetal assumptions of comedy no longer hold.

It is difficult to disentangle the problem of the self from those of story and language as they emerge from Kroetsch's writing, but in "Bordering On: Robert Kroetsch's Aesthetic" Robert Lecker locates a metaphor which informs both his aesthetic and his literary practice. Kroetsch's aesthetic, he writes, is unified by a recurring border metaphor which for him expresses the position of the contemporary Canadian writer caught between private, geographical and archetypical extremes.[14] In spite of Kroetsch's penchant for poststructural thought,

his aesthetic is undeniably predicated upon a series of binary oppositions which find analogous expression in his novels. Exhumed, the infrastructure of his fiction is a tension-ridden field of contraries: old world/new world, world/earth, world/void, naming/chaos, naming/flight, absence/trace, trace/erasure, male/female, energy/stasis, self/community, voice/absence, writing/voice.

This observation, conjoined with that of Peter Thomas' analysis of the principal dynamics of Kroetsch's novel Badlands (an analysis which holds for most of Kroetsch's fiction), provides a place to begin to study the elements of his aesthetic.

> In his account of the immediate past, Kroetsch moves through memory towards an understanding of the essential compulsions and psychological dispositions, which, in their extended possibilities, contain the elements of an ur-myth--the contention of male and female principles. . . .
>
> The questing male is everywhere in conflict with the 'naming' female, the mother who resides with the female deities of place, essentially agrarian and of the earth. . . . Kroetsch's understanding of 'the poetic act' [naming] leads him away from the specificity of any imagiste thing-itself, lifting him instead upon some version of the male quest--a quest which is essentially and absolutely antagonistic to the female acceptance of locus, and which is finally drawn 'West', to death.
>
> (Robert Kroetsch, 11-12)

In an interview with Geoff Hancock Robert Kroetsch remarked: "we control the world by naming it and lose it by naming it. Because the name starts to replace the whatever else. . . . The way answers do."[15] Then, later: "[p]eople tell stories and in that sense use narrative to construct a reality. . . ."[16] And in "Beyond Nationalism: a Prologue" he writes: "hearing the silence of the world, the failure of the world to announce meaning, to tell stories. . . . We tell stories and then, hearing our stories told, we ask if their meaning is

in the content, or in the telling itself" (Essays, 83). Here the game space of Kroetsch's aesthetic and his fiction, and the precarious, ultimately circular dynamics of his writing are constituted. The human need to name and to tell stories (that is, to construct the generic ordering narratives of which Butor writes) inevitably seeks to totalize itself and create a "world"; the basic compulsion underlying story is the need to create relations and systematize concepts and phenomena into coherent referential frames or "texts" which allow the world to be intelligible and significant. These texts multiply and generate further texts which, over time, cover experiential reality with an ancient rhetoric that covers the fissure between sign and thing, claiming for the world a plenitude of meaning. Hence world offers a pseudo-mandala that must be decentred, opened or exploded if the individual is to "kick free" and find authenticity.

Mandala is an awkward metaphor to use in relation to Kroetsch's understanding of the self. Like his contemporaries, against the traditional concept of human being as stable essence, he posits the idea of self as discursive construction, as a discontinuous, unstable intertext. In "For Play and Entrance: The Contemporary Canadian Long Poem" he qualifies the idea of self (or coherent ego) as "preposterous" (Essays, 107); and in conversation with Shirley Neuman and Robert Wilson in Labyrinths of Voice, he insists "the self is just a kind of a fragment, a shifting pattern, you see, and the notion that the self was somehow a nut somewhere that hadn't been cracked or whatever is absurd to us now."[17] Like the world in which it operates, the self is the "concretion" and repetition of names and texts. Thus language slowly and paradoxically begins to obliterate the experiential

reality of the things it names, and hence loses its authenticity. This degradation of language and of the thing it names can, ironically, stabilize consensual reality by allowing it to retreat from that which is "demonized".[18] This is the repetitive, "plagiarizing" edge of language, which finds its visual equivalent in the early woodcuts of the Canadian landscape which superimposed idyllic pastoral frames on the raw land. It is a problem which becomes all the more acute in a colonial situation. It is, perhaps, as great a temptation as it is a problem, as Kroetsch observes in his iconoclastic survey of Can lit in "Contemporary Standards in the Canadian Novel":

> 4. Dear Novelist: Please make us feel at home. The naming. The domestication. Margaret Laurence. Robertson Davies. Mordecai Richler. The Prairie dweller. The Ontario WASP. The urban ethnic. Each in his own nagging way names us into safety, into at-homeness. Versions of Genesis. A victory of humanism--when some of us are skeptical about the humanistic tradition.[19]

This is the blessing and the curse of what Kroetsch calls "mandarin language", a language of covert negation that fits nicely into Barthes' conception of the two "edges" of all innovative discourse.

In The Pleasure of the Text Roland Barthes distinguishes the two edges of language found in texts that, as he phrases it, "redistribute language":

> Two edges are created: an obedient, conformist, plagiarizing edge (the language is to be copied in its canonical state, as it has been established by schooling, good usage, literature, culture), and another edge, mobile, blank (ready to assume any contours) which is never anything but the site of its effect: the place where the death of language is glimpsed. These two edges, the compromise they bring about, are necessary.
>
> (The Pleasure of the Text, 6-7)

The conventional edge of language, he writes later, supports ideological

systems that are fictions (27), while itself becoming a "jelled", consistent fiction; "Every fiction is supported by a social jargon, a sociolect, with which it identifies: fiction is that degree of consistency a language attains when it has jelled exceptionally and finds a sacerdotal class (priests, intellectuals, artists) to speak it generally and to circulate it" (27-28).

Language--and this includes the experiential grammar encoded within inherited genres--can encourage a retreat from the demonized world and the self through an insidious neutralization of individual and collective différance (or parole). This frustrates the "local pride", "the imaginative possession of place" necessary to the realization of an authentic parole; in one of his essays Kroetsch points out that those who are outside of the experiential canon fail to recognize the connection between art and life; knowledge becomes, literally, knowledge of someone else.[20]

This issue--the problem of colonial invisibility and erasure perpetuated by the adhesion to "mandarin language"--is considered in three of Kroetsch's essays: "The Canadian Writer and the American Literary Tradition", "On Being an Alberta Writer" and "Unhiding the Hidden: Recent Canadian Fiction". Using the American situation and the American psyche as a foil, Kroetsch baldly asserts the invisibility of the Canadian people in this essay.

> In America they ask: who am I? Am I by nature violent? Am I basically anti-intellectual? Am I condemned to go on destroying westward?
>
> Canadians do not ask who they are. They ask, rather, if they are.[21]

Canadians, he implies, are those versed in absence: their own absence.

In "On Being an Alberta Writer" he tells the story of his discovery of his own invisibility:

> There was an older boy a mile from our farm who, as we kids liked to put it, knew everything. . . . I remember that he could recite the names and dates of kings and prime ministers from whomever was thought to be first to the latest. I asked him about buffalo wallows. He'd never even heard of buffalo wallows. But more: he made considerable show of not caring that he hadn't heard. He was educated.
>
> My sense of the gap between me and history was growing. History as I knew it did not account for the world I lived in. Present here in this landscape, I was taking my first lesson in the idea of absence.
>
> (Essays, 70)

He raises the implications of this problematic Canadian angst in the other, earlier, essay: "this skepticism about our existence has ontological implications--it shapes our sense of what reality is. It has epistemological implications--it governs our notions of what we can know and how we can know it" (Essays, 13).[22] We find ourselves staring down the barrel of a wildly fractured syllogism: if we do not exist (or exist inauthentically on the periphery of Anglo-American mandarin language), and the ego is a spent fiction (as Kroetsch asserts elsewhere), then how are we to be or know, or, most importantly, escape?[23]

There are very few artistic or ideological strategies that allow escape from the "tyranny of the world's narrative" and the definitions and matrices of mandarin language. Those Kroetsch names in his essays and the Crow Journals and explores in his prose are the following: the flight from story ("you tell your way out of the story"); cultivated formal and semantic ruptures that disrupt or indefinitely defer the production of a unified meaning or posture; silence; the cultivation of deconstructionist techniques that expose

and dismantle apriori structures and significations ("Trying to begin again, I invent my theory of the uninvention of the world" writes Kroetsch). Recognizing how the problem of language becomes one of culture, society, and identity (Essays, 21), his tentative answer, then, is that Canadians must uncreate themselves into existence, must talk their way into a "decreated and valid self" (Essays, 20). They must disengage a parole from within the massive and satiated body of mandarin language; they must, somehow, articulate Canadian différance using the subversive edge of language. This deconstructive strategy places an immense burden upon the writer, who must become the paradigmatic destroyer and creator, the communal frame-shifter.

The theme/strategy of deconstructing the world is pursued in "Unhiding the Hidden: Recent Canadian Fiction", where Kroetsch compares the uninvention of the world found in three contemporary English-Canadian novels: Margaret Atwood's Surfacing, Robertson Davies' The Manticore, and Rudy Wiebe's The Temptations of Big Bear. He prefaces his analysis with a short note explaining his own conversion to the deconstructive mode:

> At one time I considered it the task of the Canadian writer to give names to his experience, to be the namer. I now suspect that on the contrary, it is his task to un-name.
>
> . . . The Canadian writer's particular predicament is that he works with a language, within a literature, that appears to be authentically his own, and not a borrowing.
>
> . . . In recent Canadian fiction the major writers resolve the paradox--the painful tension between appearance and authenticity--by the radical process of demythologizing the systems that threaten to define them. Or, more comprehensively, they uninvent the world.
>
> (Essays, 17)

In Surfacing, Kroetsch relates, Atwood's heroine must remove the false names that adhere to her experience and surface into the

primal state in which she "might . . . give birth to her true identity" (Essays, 19). The hero of Davies' novel, on the other hand, "must begin by confronting death and the father" (Essays, 19) and go through a difficult process of being reunited with his animal nature and his pre-cognitive emotions in a cave in order to reintegrate a lost and suppressed anima. In The Temptations of Big Bear, through the protagonist, the Indian Big Bear, "Wiebe . . . must talk his way into his decreated and valid self", destroying "the sentence itself back to sense, back to its ground" (Essays, 20-21). There are three ways, then, to uninvent the world: through a retreat and rebirth through Earth or woman (the two are perhaps conflated in the Buffalo-Woman of Gone Indian), or through the deconstruction of language and the acquired self back to a primal experiential ground. And, in "Contemporary Standards in the Canadian Novel", Kroetsch's musings on contemporary literature and the work of Sinclair Ross and Malcolm Lowry, a fourth manner of uninventing the world is suggested. Against Ross's temptation to silence, he writes, there is Lowry's temptation to write the final book, the book that would free us not from but into writing: "[t]he unfinished book that we are always reading and never finishing: because every story needs a story to explain, to tell, how come the story was told. The endless beginning" (Essays, 44). This is the dream of the indefinitely deferred text, of, finally, the indefinitely deferred world.

At times during the history of the world's cultures, it has been considered the function of the artist to name the world and teach the community cleansed perception. These are the teachers, shamans, tricksters, world-makers and escape artists--the paradigmatic selves

who know how to kick free of the acquired self, how to assume the personae of the "coyote self", how to stay, as Kroetsch put it, "unconcluded". The acquired self (synonymous in Kroetsch's writing with the "taught man") is, in Kroetsch's fiction as well as his essays, constantly pitted against the coyote self, that fugal and constantly re-imagined, re-written self that assumes a succession of fictional poses in order to escape any concluded definition of its nature or mode of being. Where the taught man's existence is validated by stasis and the possession of characteristics and situation that render identity "individual, autonomous, stable", the need for flight and the constant dispossession of self is endemic to the coyote mode of being.[24]

In his prose, the strong but ambivalent attraction that the coyote self holds for the civilized man is formulated in the perennial tension between Kroetsch's narrator and his protagonist, in the draw of the frontier, the border, the unmapped and uncreated regions of the West; the "far interior" that offers the weary agents the possibility of going Indian, into the open and matte forms of possibility.[25]

The metaphors of the frontier and the border might initially seem to be synonyms, one metaphor rather than two. In Robert Kroetsch Peter Thomas analyses the metaphor of the frontier, finding that it is "the place of unmaking", the place of transmutation, of the "reconstitution of self" (69) and the release from self. The border, Lecker writes, is the place of transformation, the point at which opposites meet and undergo metamorphosis, the place where a recursive chaos thrives between polar extremes.[26] These two critics focus upon the different nuances of these two near-synonyms: while Lecker concentrates upon the political aspect of the word "border", necessarily

upon the literary, ontological and ideological relationship between Canada and the United States as articulated in Kroetsch's discourse, Thomas explores the frontier as the metaphor expressing the interaction of civilization and the blank, uncreated land of the NorthWest. With Ann Mandel, he argues that the land is finally important for its psychological impact upon human being, quoting her:

> 'This boundary-less landscape would seem to enforce solitude and self-consciousness. Yet it is a place which completely sees you, a landscape which violates the self and uncreates it in an instant. Kroetsch, with his radical belief in man as fictional animal, writes out of that uninventing place, where only the most violent with ceremonious fictions could possibly raise an image from the ground.'
> (in Robert Kroetsch, 98)

The prairie is, ultimately, a psychic far-interior, an end-place where Kroetsch's questing agents leap and find freedom and a release from self and history in a lateral space that is almost indistinguishable from, indeed sometimes is, death. It is the place where unbounded physical and psychic space induces a prairie vertigo or northern ecstasy, an erasure that allows nothingness to seep through the palimpsest drawn in invisible ink, the map of the world, the fiction of the essentialist self.

It has been established by Peter Thomas that the male quest, however parodic or antiheroic, is, in Kroetsch's fiction, a strategy designed to escape the world's narrative, the naming female who is the "keeper of the rules", and the historic place. But commentators differ on the interpretation of the goal of Kroetsch's antiheroic quests, and their observations bring to light contradictory impulses inherent in the Kroetschean quest motif and the overt flight from meaning (or world-closure) apparent in his essays. At different points in his

study of Robert Kroetsch, Peter Thomas sees the quest of Kroetsch's male protagonists as a search for chaos, for the radical dispossession of the acquired self (58); as the ambiguous quest for freedom that reveals itself to be a flight from the mother, the ur-myth of the Magna Mater, the past, and, at last, a search for death (36); as a search for the "restored source-self", the "name under the name". It is also, particularly in his poetry, an ambivalent search for "ground", "the condition preceding creation" (19). Quoting Kroetsch in "The Canadian Writer and the American Literary Tradition", Robert Lecker argues that the quests found in Kroetsch's discourse are a "quest for the self", but, with the arrival of a doppelgänger, the dynamics of that quest are inverted: "[d]oubled, the quest for the self becomes a quest for anonymity; the search for voice becomes a race for silence; the urge to liberation becomes the need to lose".[27] Lecker, in another article, implicitly reads Kroetsch's need to write as an analogous quest for source, for "the dream of origin":

> Entering The Leger involves Kroetsch in this double-sided tale of construction and destruction which seldom, if ever, balances. Everywhere he looks there are holes . . . which he tries to fill up by imagining absences: 'EVERYTHING I WRITE,/ I SAID, IS A SEARCH', a 'search for the dead', for 'some pages remaining. 'Thus Kroetsch's ledger is a 'book of final entry' in that it describes his inward journey to the record of his past, only the act of 'FINDING' it, and he ends up writing a ledger about the ledger, a story about stories.
>
> (in Robert Kroetsch, 17)

Underneath the parodic, now-impossible traditional male quest there exists the writer's inward quest for origin and language; and it is that quest which remains operative in his poetry and his essays.

This is a quest only partially contained or undercut by

Kroetsch's ironic sensibility. Everywhere in his writing origin is a crucial but illusory horizon that recedes as he "engages the action of memory" and moves toward the "seedbed of song" (Robert Kroetsch, 19). It is a pilgrimage to the land of the dead in search of an ontological ground, as this excerpt from an unpublished journal of his makes clear:

> Ground. That word so much in use today. What does it mean beyond the dirt that the dirt farmer uses to grow wheat? Some kind of urcondition, existence itself before any naming. The stuff before the stuff that is history or culture or art. That which is before the self, even. The stuff of which 'place' is made. By dwelling on place we hope to get back through the naming to the ground.
>
> (in Robert Kroetsch, 19)

This writing-quest is an archeological act in which the writer excavates and uninvents himself, language and history, pulling at the strands of their intertexts, dissolving into his own discourse as he tries to use writing to recover an "absolute source" or origin that cannot be reached. Instead, the narrator or (implied) author finds only death and absence. It is a failed search for ancestral presence that ends not in epiphany, but in the exposure of the impossibility of the myth of origin, and, necessarily, in a sense of loss and dislocation. The myth of origin must give way to the "dream of origin" of which Kroetsch writes, the healing act of imaginatively repossessing place and self in the lateral space of fiction.[28]

The typology of the writer found in Kroetsch's essays grows out of this fundamental ambivalence. Kroetsch is torn between the need for roots and the necessity of motion, between his need to "dwell at the centre" and his bent towards a postmodern cosmology of flux and relativity antipathetical to the idea of source. In his interviews and essays he identifies three important artistic postures: the artist

as Trickster, the artist as Shaman, and the artist as Bull-Shit artist.

In his The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology Paul Radin describes the Trickster figure as an amoral force who is at once the "delight-maker", the "culture-bringer" who sets the feet of man on the soft sloping shoulders of the world, the "creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dupes others and is always duped himself".[29] The Trickster is possibly at bottom a primitive psychological exteriorization, Radin argues (later supported by Jung's commentary), a "speculum mentis wherein is depicted man's struggle with himself and with a world into which he had been thrust without his volition and consent" (x), a primitive shadow-figure. Joseph Campbell, in The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology, describes the Trickster: "A fool, and a cruel lecherous cheat, an epitome of the principle of disorder" who has recurred in many forms throughout history; notably as Hermes, the "shape-shifter and master of the way to the land of the dead", and Prometheus, the fire-bringer.[30] These two avatars clearly indicate this figure's metamorphic nature, and his close relationship to both creative and destructive principles.

In Kroetsch's aesthetic, the Trickster is a mask for the Dionysian principle, the principle of irrationality that seeks to "kick free" of a priori structures and institutions (history, canonical literature, place, relations, world-matrices, conceptual closures), a principle that remains in a necessary but unstable tension with that which it opposes.[31] In Freudian terms, it might perhaps be described as the unsublimated irrational energy that threatens to dissolve societal structures if it remains unchannelled; the energy within the art form, Kroetsch once wrote, that threatens to burst the

form apart, kick it to pieces. The violence of this irrational force can be and is used as a way into and out of a structured world at the conceptual level. In "The Exploding Porcupine: Violence of Form in English-Canadian Fiction" Kroetsch explores the grammars of violence found in contemporary works, these "ceremonies of disbelief":

> The theory of answers, for us, is a dangerous one. We must resist endings, violently. And so we turn from content to the container. It is the form itself, traditional form, that forces resolution. In our most ambitious writing, we do violence to form. . . .
>
> The words violence and deconstruction are in complicity; but violence is prior to, more primitive than, deconstruction. Deconstruction implies, for all its attraction to disorder, a recovery of order, control; not so much the moment as the moment after.[32]

And, in the guise of a conclusion, he writes about the necessary destruction of the self and the novel from within: the renewal, he declares, cannot come from outside the structure, cannot be brought about by the introduction of new materials into an existing form. The porcupine-novel and the porcupine-self must be "violated from within": "[t]he novel becomes a continuing apocalypse. . . . the exploding porcupine" (Essays, 63).

This is the necessary act of decreation: the uninvention of a form, a world, of a "tradition that writes the novel", the "form that creates the author"; whatever threatens to enclose the self in alien or essential terms.[33] The writer, Kroetsch is arguing, must become a shape-shifter, a world-opener, a chaos-bringer, a liar. The contemporary Canadian writer must become a disciple of Felix Paul Greve and Coyote:

the artist him/her self:

> in the long run, given the choice of being God or Coyote, will, most mornings, choose to be Coyote:
>
> he lets in the irrational along with the rational, the pre-moral with the moral. He is a shape-shifter, at least in the limited way of old lady Potter. He is the charlatan-healer, like Felix Prosper, the low-down Buddha-bellied fiddler midwife (him/her) rather than Joyce's high priest of art.
> . . . the reader should recognize that he has met the novelist as jester. Ultimately, as trickster. And he, the old reader, must slowly unlearn concepts of character. Of motivation. He must, to sum it up in one expression, acquire Negative Capability.
>
> (in Figures in a Ground, 209-10)

One final excerpt from this dialogue will show how far Kroetsch has travelled from the positions of earlier generations of Canadian novelists:

> [t]he hazard of the essential novel is in that implicit word, essence. With the dross burned away, the novel stripped, deconstructed--we have the final victory of the platonic form emerging as the quidditas. . . .
> One is tempted to rush out of the garden and into the bush.
>
> (in Figures in a Ground, 212)

If I may be permitted to crib the bones of an observation made by Frank Kermode: it would seem that English-Canadian prose has passed from a literature which assumed that it was imitating an order to a literature which assumed that it had to create an order, to a literature that flees or explodes pre-existing orders. It has arrived in the era of the "decomposition of Great Stories," the time of the degeneration of generic ordering narratives.[34]

In his novels, Kroetsch's deconstructionist bent takes the form of a sustained rhetorical interrogation of the quest-myth, the mythos from which, Frye argues, all literary genres are subsequently derived.[35] This interrogation, taken with his corrosive parody,

reductios ad absurdum, and penchant for dismantling mythoi suggests an equivocal attitude toward the received literary tradition, a heightened ambivalence. In a somewhat more dramatic fashion than usual, a critic can discern the existence of two "texts" that constitute his discourse; texts that, following Barthes, can be understood as being "reactive" and "active":

> In what he writes, there are two texts. Text I is reactive, moved by indignations, fears, unspoken rejoinders, minor paranoias, defenses, scenes. Text II is active, moved by pleasure.[36]

In the "creative misprisions" of his discourse, Kroetsch appears to be at least as satiated by tradition as he is attracted to it or repulsed by it. His reaction against the "lines of force" posited by Bloom is at least as strong as is his practice of what he terms the "erotic model" of influence. Embracing Derrida in Labyrinths of Voice, he asserts that the writer must assert his writerliness by doing violence to form and the order of tradition, thus escaping the ordering myths and paradigms that threaten to immobilize the world and negate his parole, his différance.[37]

The strategies to uninvent or neutralize received forms found in Kroetsch's novels include parody, inversion, conflation, dissemination, willful irresolution, the presence of intra- or extra-diegetic skeptical consciousness that undermines and frustrates the construction of coherent narrative, and the assertion of the arbitrary nature of the signifier and its right to free play (which enhances the fissure between the signifier and the thing signified, thus exposing the relativity and the artifice of the fictional world and discourse in general). In Robert Kroetsch Peter Thomas remarks that Kroetsch's

dismantling of coherent narrative often takes the form of an "assault upon the smaller units of conventional narrative" (99). He quotes a comment Kroetsch made in an interview with Geoff Hancock--in which Kroetsch states that '"the chapter is another version of naming"'--and then points to the existence of "antichapters" in his novels. These are units which "unname" the chapter by presenting themselves without a climax, or exist simply as "extended shouts, repeated words, digressions" (99). Thomas then goes on to give a succinct précis of the uninvented narratorial techniques found in What the Crow Said: "[p]robability, causality, temporal consistency, psychologically coherent characterization, are all elements more or less outraged in What the Crow Said" (100).

Kroetsch's prose aesthetic leads inexorably from the strategy of deconstruction to the concepts of game and play. Play, as Huizinga so eloquently demonstrates in Homo Ludens, is freedom: in literary terms, the pooled conventions of literature, the sum of its strategies, genres, motifs and texts provide the source from which to select and combine the axioms that will structure and define the boundaries of Kroetsch's own game-space.[38] Kroetsch's literary play is characterized by the fragmented and polyphonic qualities of his discourse, a cultivated disjunctiveness that resists the "game" of literature in favour of tentative, fugal, even self-annulling play that resists the closure of oeuvre, positing the ideal of an indefinitely deferred but ongoing process of writing. This play is also marked by the levelling and disconcerting interpenetration of the registers of traditional literary discourse and folk speech. This is what might be termed the carnivalisation of literature, a phenomenon

that could conceivably be attributed to a sensibility cognizant of a certain cultural exhaustion. In "Other Fictions: Robert Kroetsch's Criticism" Barbara Godard explains Kroetsch's attraction to the concept of carnival put forward in Mikhail Bakhtin's study of Rabelais:

> Kroetsch's resistance to the hegemony of established ideas finds support in Bakhtin's definition of the novel as the descendant of the carnival tradition which parodies and travesties the forms of dominant culture. . . . Kroetsch extends Bakhtin's paradigm to a new world writing. . . . As he [Kroetsch] suggests, North American culture in its entirety is an uncrowning of European authority.[39]

The goal of carnival as it is found in English-Canadian literature is, both Kroetsch and Godard agree, the uncrowning of English literature. Godard goes on to point out another aspect of the carnivalesque mode that attracts Kroetsch: Bakhtin's theory of the dialogical nature of the novel "provides a model for oscillation and process within the framework of an ideological challenge, and thus simultaneously embraces scepticism and idealism".[40] Kroetsch's inveterate scepticism about the authority of the literary tradition, his suspicion of the "temptation to meaning", and his search for origin, authenticity and voice seem to find a common ground in his overriding strategy.

The carnivalization of literature found in Kroetsch's novels is one aspect of the major strategy he deploys against the recuperation of his writing by literature. This strategy, the cultivation of différance, breaks down into two general tactics: the elaboration of a "grammar of delay" (Essays, 91), and the deferral of formal and semantic closure through the deconstruction of narrative and the inherited structures of meaning. These tactics inexorably drive Kroetsch back towards immanent discursive modes.

In "For Play and Entrance: The Contemporary Canadian Long Poem" he writes that twentieth-century poets, moving away from traditional narrative modes, abandoned "their inherited grammar" of world-making and were "driven back to the moment of creation" (Essays, 91). Their quest was no longer the quest for closure or "ending", but, rather, they sought "the dwelling at and in the beginning itself" (Essays, 91). And, significantly, Kroetsch intimates that this artistic crisis is concomitant with an epistemological and ontological crisis at times pervaded by an odd nostalgia:

> The problem for the writer of the contemporary long poem is to honour our disbelief in belief--that is, to recognize and explore our distrust of system, of grid, of monisms, of cosmologies perhaps, certainly of inherited story--and at the same time write a long work that has some kind of (under erasure) unity.
>
> (Essays, 92)

But this unity is becoming hard to come by: "Homer wrote poems without stanzas. We threaten to write stanzas (fragments, pieces, journals, 'takes,' cantos even) that cannot become the poem" (Essays, 100). This "foreplay" is one of the few remaining strategies that will allow speech, though that discourse cannot approach too near its own completion, its own plenitude, or it risks neutralization, recuperation.[41] Paradoxically, literary discourse moves several degrees closer to silence, its utterances eloquently staving off world while the zones of infra- and ultra-language threaten to tide and overwhelm these very fragile and tentative utterances. Here the centrifugal impulse of contemporary writing seems to be approaching its conceivable limits, its edges, the blankness of the page become a refuge from meaning, no longer so much silence or breath as absence:

Place become space.

The beautiful blankness of the page.

Absence. . . .

And later Bruns says that

> Barthes is saying that modern poetry is not simply 'poetic discourse' and therefore merely a different kind of discourse from prose or conversation. Modern poetry is nondiscourse: the modern poetic act is not intentional; it is a refusal to mean.
>
> (Essays, 99)

Kroetsch's aesthetic of delay is reiterated and elaborated in an observation found in Labyrinths of Voice:

> We want to decenter rather than to center. We don't want that center which encompasses, which entraps. . . . You stay alive by moving around on those edges where you risk meaninglessness all the time. . . . Now existing on the circumference rather than in the center excites me. It is a way to resist entrapment, to resist endings and completion. On the circumference we can defer meaning and other finalities. I want to avoid both meaning and conclusiveness.
>
> (Labyrinths of Voice, 130)

But, as Kroetsch himself observes in "For Play and Entrance", delay is the mother of beauty, but it can also become a misnaming of death (Essays, 107). This is, potentially, one of the contradictions of process art. In Robert Kroetsch Peter Thomas points to another, that of non-movement within movement, a kind of static flight of becoming become a holding-pattern. Analyzing the paralysis of Jeremy Sadness, the protagonist of Gone Indian, Thomas writes: "Jeremy's inability to go further than parodic titles also expresses the essential contradictions of 'process art', which confronts terrible and final choices . . . by continual redefinition of structure, forever becoming" (80).

The place of becoming, of delay, and, possibly, death, is the hypothetical terminus of Kroetsch's literary practice. This is

the "welcome dream of Babel": this is atopia, the floating world of the text, the "drifting habitation", the place of Scheherezade and matte phenomena, of textual pleasure and bliss. Pursued to its logical conclusion, it is a radical dissolution and sundering of world and text, the inward collapse of a strategy of foregrounding language and delay that has devolved upon itself rather than onto "new resources" or narrative (Essays, 107-8). This is, to put it crudely, a rejection of the traditional function of the writer as world-builder or world-orderer. It is perhaps the fullest expression of the postmodern Trickster aesthetic.

Yet within Kroetsch's aesthetic there is an impulse which counters the Trickster impulse, one that has received comparatively little critical attention. This is the notion of the artist as shaman. The shaman is a figure contiguous with the Trickster in primitive mythology, but one whose activities are in several respects opposed to those of the Trickster. In an interview with Robert Enright, speaking about what he termed the "tribal obligation" of some Western poets, Kroetsch said:

> They aren't isolatos, to use Melville's phrase, at all. They are shamans; they are given the burden of acting out or speaking tribal visions or truths or jokes. I guess when I talked about my experience as a kid, in a sense if I was called to be anything, I was called to be a shaman in a world that didn't have shamans.[42]

Although there is often a great deal of conscious fraud surrounding the activities of the shaman, he is an undeniably powerful visionary healing-figure back from death, the person charged with

maintaining the psychic and cosmologic equilibrium of a community. Because his means of healing often include drawn pictures, songs and ritualistic dances, he is generally regarded by anthropologists as being a "proto-artist". The shamanistic side of Kroetsch is the one haunted by the idea of authenticity, origin/source, ground and Voice, the part of him concerned with the communal function of language and story-telling. This is the half of Kroetsch that is profoundly attracted to oral culture and its holdouts. It is the part that writes, in an introduction to Glen Sorestad's Prairie Pub Poems, that art is a ritual act, a recurrence, a recognition of continuity; that language and the communal story uses the poet in order to speak itself (Essays, 31). This is the writer as amenuensis now, no longer the Trickster fascinated by the "sheer license of fiction" and the deconstructive potentialities of human consciousness.[43] Here poetic vision is through the ear, not the eye; and it is gained fully only through descent into the destructive element--time.

The fundamental progression Peter Thomas finds in Kroetsch's ongoing long poem, Field Notes, is a shamanistic plunge into the past.[44] It is an "imaginative descent through time, by means of a reinvented family past, to consciousness formed by memory, and, in the most recent section, flight from space/time into what is effectively a shamanistic dream-song. Descent and flight are therefore contained within the same formal development, implicitly essential to each other" (30-31). Kroetsch's novels, to a greater or a lesser degree, enact this same descent using the Prairie past: in both his poetry and his novels, this descent has been toward origin, a journey to the land of the dead and to a place very near death: the far interior. The search

there is for Voice, for the centre in which to dwell, for the mythoi that could heal a fundamental dislocation and sense of absence, for a language that could heal the split between story and self. It appears to be at once a search for integration, authenticity and relatedness (for a mandala, if you like), as well as a search for a freedom from the logos of history and the literary tradition. In the fluidity of the oral world Kroetsch seeks to effect the uninvention and carnivalization of the written literary tradition through Voice. Necessarily, then, in his novelistic descents, history is undone and repeats itself as farce as it unravels toward apocalypse.

In "Bordering On: Robert Kroetsch's Aesthetic" Robert Lecker analyses the elements of the oral prairie tradition that attract Kroetsch and seem to offer him a kind of freedom. Oral literature, observes Lecker, unites performance with process: its defining features are spontaneity, idiosyncracy, personal expression, and a narrative fluidity that arises from the absence of any fixed, unalterable text. This, writes Lecker, means that oral composition is paratactic, agglomerative: the text is built by adding clauses or ideas which could logically terminate at any point, or be reconstructed in any way. Therefore, the processes of creation and destruction operate simultaneously in the oral tradition, defying the stasis of the written text, offering instead a paratactic text and fictional world in which everything is constantly created, renewed, and in flux, including the speaker and his story:[45]

> The open-ended nature of oral poetry obviously makes it impossible for any single text to be accurately memorized or retold. . . . Kroetsch's interest in the oral tradition explains, in part, why he must 'almost destroy the old story to tell the new one' and involve himself with

> 'breaking with forms more and more, of parody, and that sort of thing'. . . . It also explains why he is 'fascinated . . . by the effects of moving away from realism--the kinds of freedom you get at'. . . . These 'sterner varieties of realism,' aligned with the mimetic notion that writing imitates life, are obviously at odds with oral poetry, which is built on the notion that reality cannot be imitated.[46]

The oral tradition offers the possibility of a fluid reinvention of self and world, the possibility of talking toward a story, and, perhaps, a communal voice (Labyrinths, 171).

The epicentre of the oral tradition is, as both Christopher Norris in Deconstruction: Theory and Practice and Walter J. Ong in Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word observe, "speech" or voice.[47] The human voice, writes Norris, is the ultimate sanction of all philosophies which base themselves more or less explicitly on a metaphysics of origin and presence, of plenitude (28). Voice, in this construct, becomes a metaphor, perhaps even a metonomy, for that which is true (or revealed, disclosed in the Heideggerean sense of aletheia). Ong concurs with the sense of plenitude Norris finds in orality, and offers some insights into the psychodynamics of orality. Oral cultures, unlike literate cultures, can be characterized as "homeostatic": that is, "they live very much in a present which keeps itself in equilibrium by sloughing off memories which no longer have present relevance" (46). Etymologies are inconceivable in these societies: "oral cultures of course have no dictionaries and few semantic discrepancies. The meaning of each word is controlled by . . . 'direct semantic ratification', that is, by the real-life situations in which the word is used here and now. The oral mind is uninterested in definitions" (47). Conceptual abstraction is minimal, since concepts

are employed in very concrete situational frames of reference. Perhaps most important is Ong's explanation of the phenomenological dynamics of sound in a primarily oral culture:

> . . . the way in which the word is experienced is always momentous in psychic life. The centering action of sound (the field of sound is not spread before me but is all around me) affects man's sense of the cosmos. For oral cultures, the cosmos is an ongoing event with man at its center. Man is the umbilicus mundi, the navel of the world.
> (Orality and Literacy, 73)

Speech (voice) thus implies a plenitude of meaning and being; it creates both centre and context, grounding the speaker and the listener in presence. The prairie beer parlour is the navel of Kroetsch's lost oral world, the place out of time where things are centred, unified, present and self-renewing: the place of the bull-shit artist whose yarns ravel and unravel his personal story and that of the community in the company of his listening accomplices:

> . . . a beer parlour is a sacred place. The True Drinker knows that to enter in through those doors, off the street of a small town, is to enter a place where time is suspended. In the sacred place of the beer-parlour, we are allowed to change identities--in our laughter, in our silence, in the stories we tell, in what we remember from the past. . . . We are God's blessed creatures, seeking a prairie version of ecstasy, sharing the poet's divine madness.
> (Essays, 31)

To listen here, he writes, is to recover our story, is to dwell at the centre again (Essays, 30). The beer-parlour is, for Kroetsch, an agrarian lateral space which allows its male Scheherezadian devotees to exist outside of time (ex-stasis), dwelling instead in the plenitude of a "continuing oral fiction" which allows them to engage in a series of open-ended transformational speech acts which hold the dangers of completion at bay.

It is hardly surprising, then, that Kroetsch associates voice with origin and ground. Rejecting history, he turns to the use of a discontinuous archeological method of discovery which unites the oral tradition with the myth of origins (Essays, 76), which turns up traces of an immanent past to be employed in the re-imagination of self and the creation of the "dream of origin" in his discourse.

The major sub-text of prairie literature is, in his opinion, "our oral tradition" (Essays, 75). This oral tradition, "become a literary tradition, points us back to our own landscape, our recent ancestors, and . . . our own speech" (Essays, 76). It is at this point, I think, that the submerged contradictions between voice and writing begin to surface in Kroetsch's aesthetic.[48] Here is a suite of quotations found in Labyrinths of Voice and his essays that will, taken with his other statements on the nature and function of writing in relation to the community, begin to demonstrate the nostalgic irresolutions found in his discourse.

> There are these two sides to language: langue and parole. Langue is the great-given, the sum total of words and grammar and literature and concluded speech. Parole is what one of us says, the uniqueness of the speaking (writing) person. If you are unlucky, the great-given swamps you, and even when you speak, you are silent. If you are incredibly lucky, and if you work your ass off, the great-given sounds, not over, but in your unique speaking. If that happens, then you have found a Voice.
>
> (Essays, 23)

> I started out with an interest in what I suppose we'd call voice . . . voice as a grounding in a speech model as opposed to what I learned to do as a writer of language. . . . I was very quick at learning this writing-it-down, and again I felt almost guilty at my ability to write out my own speech patterns or voice. More recently, I've been troubled by the sense of language as an end in itself. . . . it seems to me that the language is totally removed from the notion of speech and voice. . . . I don't think I understood

> at first how language is separate from what it signifies. . . . it's only recently that I came to see that what language signified was language.
>
> (Labyrinths of Voice, 141-42)

> There is a communal language which one is responsible to. I think the Canadian writer's sense of responsibility to that voice makes him quite different from an American writer quite often. You get a sense almost of submission to that voice in a lot of Canadian writing. . . . I get uneasy about that surrender to it.
>
> (Quoted in Robert Kroetsch, 116)

> Once we lost our belief in the verbal structures that announce belief--those vast systems, whether they were moral or religious or even political--once we lost that sense that the language was signifying those whole systems, we came back to language itself. So I'm not always happy with my own awareness of language; I think it already bespeaks an absence. . . .
> That has further implications: absence and silence start to come together.
>
> (Labyrinths of Voice, 143)

A great deal of deconstructionist activity is engaged in a violent refutation of what Derrida terms the "Western metaphysics of meaning and presence", what he defines as "the white mythology which assembles and reflects Western culture", the logos of the white man, the mythos he calls Reason, a mythology which remains "inscribed in white ink, an invisible drawing covered over in the palimpsest" of occidental discourse.[49] This logocentric metaphysics, in which being is conceived of as presence, privileges speech, "the natural condition of language". This bias, as several critics have pointed out, survives into Saussure's work, where speech is implicitly privileged and writing is treated as a "derivative" or "secondary" form of linguistic notation, always dependent on the primary reality of speech and the sense of a speaker's presence behind his words" (Deconstruction, 26). If speech (voice) has always been the cachet and the assurance of authenticity and presence, then writing has always been mistrusted,

intuitively understood as a threat (as Norris puts it) to the deeply traditional view that associates truth and presence (or "self-presence") with speech (Deconstruction, 28).

In his brilliant critique of Rousseau, Derrida argues that language, once past the stage of the "primitive cry", is always inhabited by degrees of absence and erased being.[50] As Norris observes:

> Speech is always shot through with the differences and traces of non-present meaning which constitute articulate language. To attempt to 'think the origin' in Rousseau's fashion is therefore to arrive at a paradox which cannot be resolved or surpassed.
>
> (Deconstruction, 37)

Origin is a "state of plenitude beyond recall" which is "nowhere present in language" (Deconstruction 37). The evolution of writing necessarily involves a movement away from origin and the centering abilities of language. The aspects of communal language fall away as writers evolve an individual parole. Origins, especially in a literate culture, are, as Derrida (and later Geoffrey Hartman) argue, "delusive" (92). The impossibility of retrieving origin through the medium of literature or literary language becomes self-evident. The reality of the omnipresence of a generic and synergistic intertextuality overwhelm the tentative postulate of origin. Structuralism exposed the myth of absolute presence in a text: what appears to be an integral voice or authorial presence is exposed as a relative patchwork of citations which have no absolute source or centre.

The logical consequence of this line of critical argument is that writing cannot retrieve or transcribe the experience of orality or the prairie oral tradition. These oral phenomena can only be

assimilated as traces and then, necessarily, transformed by an individual écriture. Writing, conceived of as the endless displacement of meaning and "swerves from origin," places language beyond the reach of a stable, self-authenticating knowledge (Deconstruction, 29); speech itself, always constituted by differences as well as traces, is also involved in this movement away from origin, but it is not as overtly antipathetical to origin as is writing.

Kroetsch's espousal of the strategy of uninvention commits, or, perhaps more accurately, condemns him to a written language which reveals its estrangement from the speech of collectivity. The idea of uninventing the self and language back to ground or origin through writing becomes a non sequitur. The origin that Kroetsch posits has long been subsumed in writing, negated and transformed into successive generations of fictions and Weltbild: the archaeological act of partial recovery which tends to blur the oral and the written becomes, I think, rather dubious. In the same manner, the search for a beginning or a dreamed centre in which to dwell through writing becomes absurd in the light of deconstructionist thought. Writing is, as Lecker observes in his analysis of The Ledger, a kind of movement that paradoxically causes the desired object to recede under another layer of discourse as that very discourse attempts to "reach" it: "he [Kroetsch] never finds that past, only the act of 'FINDING' it, and he ends up writing a ledger about the ledger, a story about stories," a story about origin.[51] This notion of origin is something approaching an aporia in his aesthetic, in part due to a use of phenomenology that works at cross-purposes with the centrifugal impulse of deconstructionism. If this aporia is probed, the facade that is the idea of origin gives

way, and what lies behind it is absence, absurdity and cosmic terror. The movement backward, into the past, that characterizes Kroetsch's novels becomes disturbing, because the motivations behind that movement, that ambivalent memory-act, are now much less clear.[52] The search for origin and alethia has become muddied: the next thread which must be disentangled and re-examined is the idea of the decreation and the reimagination of the self.

Kroetsch's imaginative discourse consistently penetrates the thin plaster of origin and finds itself re-engaged with the cosmic terror experienced by his recent ancestors, because it is not origin, but the "condition preceding creation" (Essays, 14) that is the place of the unmaking of the self. Ironically, Kroetsch's flight from the persona of the naming female through the uninvention of the world and the self lands him right back into the arms of the she-terror and silence. The female nature of the void is clearly intimated in Kroetsch's poem The Ledger, where the Grandmother is repeatedly referred to as the "terror", and woman identified with primal forces (particularly water) which are regarded with great ambivalence by the poet. In "Meditation on Tom Thomson" Kroetsch writes of that "holy shit mother" who sends her sons on Icarian flights of forgetfulness and death, feeding them and planting them back into the Earth which is her self. In Gone Indian she appears as the gateway to death and a very ambivalent rebirth:

> Now Jeremy recognized the terror of Dorck's night. The leaping night. The falling night. . . . The secret rage to fuck the healing mother of death, the virgin stark. The flesh of flesh renewing the flesh. The bush of the mother's bush.
>
> (Gone Indian, 42-43)

And Peter Thomas points to an explicit conjunction of the female principle with the destructive element in What the Crow Said: "the Great Mother reabsorbs the male fiction into her element. Just before the tower's collapse, Liebhaber is playing with his type. 'He imagined the word WATER; then, in his mind, turned the W upside down'" (106). Here, to quote Kroetsch, the geography of love and the geography of fear fuse, forcing this study back to a re-examination of the "ur-myth" of contending male and female principles which plays itself out in Kroetsch's novels as wild sexual farce.

In his reading of Alibi Robert Lecker describes the overt content of that dichotomy in Kroetsch's work:

> Here, as in his previous works, Kroetsch associates Woman with time, stasis, grounding, home, historical awareness, continuity, recovery, presence. . . . Kroetsch associates Man with space, dynamism, movement, quest, ahistorical awareness, discontinuity, loss, and absence.[53]

This dichotomy--in substance an elaboration of the horse/house dichotomy found in earlier Prairie literature--does not hold; with the ambivalent thanaturgical quest of the male for source, it literally begins to deconstruct itself. The true, latent dichotomy that informs his discourse is expressed in his essay "The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction" where he offers an "erotics of space" (Essays, 47) which masks an erotics of discourse, an ur-myth of male presence and female absence that gives rise to the cosmology that informs his imaginative worlds and his critical discourse. The question that begins the essay --"How do you make love in a new country?" (47)--is really two questions. The first is: how does one establish a relationship between male and female principles in a place that is and yet is not an ontological

tabula rasa; the second: how does one write in a new country? (And that verb should be heard with its full resonance.) Kroetsch, uneasily, resorts to the "metaphor of sex" and, interestingly, takes shelter under the anonymous plural pronoun "we":

> We conceive of external space as male, internal space as female. More precisely, the penis: external, expandable, expendable; the vagina: internal, eternal. The maleness verges on mere absence. The femaleness verges on mystery: it is a space that is not a space. External space is the silence that needs to speak, or that needs to be spoken. It is male. The having spoken is the book. It is female. It is closed.
>
> (Essays, 47)

The cosmology that these axioms and categories engender can be read like this: the male principle (active) writes upon the world, shaping or "speaking" the silence that is female; necessarily, then, language is male, or is the property of the male principle; it is "erected against death" (which has been shown to be contiguous with the female principle). The female principle is passive, receptive, enclosing, and, finally, passive-aggressive; she is at once muse, earth, void, the "vengeful bride", the chaos of the original place which contains the male, the ostensible "keeper of the rules" who functions as a pharmakos and a displaced marker for the suppressed logos of the naming Father. There is here an obsessive exteriorization and denial of the inner space of the male. In Kroetsch's cosmology the male principle (speech and writing) is wedged in a narrow space between the female principle: it is bounded on either side by silence and an ontological absence. The "ground before the self" (before discourse) is silent; the silence of an ostensible but equivocal plenitude. Then, on the far side of speech-world-self and Babel (the

texts of the Father and the fugal texts of the fleeing son, Kroetsch) is the world "decaying toward silence" (Essays, 59). These two silences interpenetrate in the blankness of the page that grounds his utterance, so that, as Peter Thomas concludes, "night, darkness, dream and silence are both the source and conclusion of story" (Robert Kroetsch, 103).

It is not surprising, given this imaginative cosmology, that the defeat of language is, as Thomas observes in his study, consistently present in Kroetsch's writing (19).[54] Underneath the immense superficial energy of his protagonists and his fractured narratives, there is an irreversible entropy and seepage of meaning in his novels which is a direct consequence of the deconstructionist techniques that inform his literary practice. His is an intensely centrifugal aesthetic which moves compulsively away from any centre, an artistic posture that induces absence and relativity and entropy into his discourse, and, by extension, the discourse of literary tradition and consensual reality.

The penultimate strategy of a deconstructionist aesthetic is, as Barthes demonstrated (and Kroetsch only serves as an additional instance), atopia, the lateral space of the indefinite deferral of meaning. The centripetal impulse of traditional comedy, both in the common and the more precise Frygian definition of the term, becomes literally impossible in an aesthetic such as Kroetsch's. His comic vision is highly atomized; his ambivalent search for origin and authenticity ends only in loss. His intriguing observation that marriage is no longer functional as a metaphor for society (Essays, 54) could, in the light of his own thinking, be interpreted as a breach

between these two ur-principles which gives rise to an aesthetic that is fundamentally entropic.

Hidden in Kroetsch's discourse is a peculiar palimpsest: on the surface, a postmodern cosmology that embraces relativity, absence, the lack of any centre, polyphony and process. Yet underneath is a nostalgia, a futile longing for source and presence that cannot be ironically or parodically dismantled. This constitutes a kind of fault-line that runs cleanly through everything he has written, a cleavage only partially contained by self-parody.

Kroetsch, like a good shaman, suffers from the same wound as the collectivity: dislocation. He constantly speaks this vision, but, not having a sense of balance, not having a psychic equilibrium that can integrate presence and void, he can neither heal himself nor produce the great, ragged visions that would free us into our lives. His idiosyncratic appropriation of the tactics of embracing a phenomenological becoming and the carnivalization of previous coercive discourses are not enough: cosmic terror and vertigo continue unabated in the "supreme comedy" of his prairie endgame, in which (as Peter Thomas puts it in Robert Kroetsch) "bullshit tries to talk away the silence of the grave" (19).

The one tentative strategy Kroetsch proposes to deploy against concluded speech while embracing absence is the tactic of metamorphosis.[55] But one looks in vain for an instance of successful transformation in his prose. There is no "Easter of recognition" (Essays, 20), no real resurrection: his coyote protagonists either leap or are sucked into the void, annihilated in otherness. Retrieving the imagery found in Kroetsch's reading of The Manticore, one might

say that Kroetsch's protagonists descend into the womb of the Great Mother Death, but because they cannot integrate the anima-void into themselves and understand that origin is a fiction, nor the paradoxical plenum and regenerative potential of absence, they cannot re-emerge; they can only be uncreated and swallowed up by their own death-urge.[56] Atopia ("the welcome dream of Babel"), the second option he proposes to replace the idea of world, is a second communally untenable option. It is very difficult to turn a deconstructive aesthetic into a healing poetic; having dismantled the generic structures and consensual reality that once may have provided a common ground between artist and community, Kroetsch's aesthetic and his discourse have separated him from the community: all of the supra-personal aspects, the "care" of his project have fallen away with the revelation of the impossibility of the idea of origin. The knowledge that might allow him to integrate presence and absence is not yet present in his writing, yet perhaps it is beginning to surface in the apparently simple and unassuming lines found in his "Delphi: Commentary":

> I want to be an olive tree, I explained, not just any old/
> tree; one of those ancient olive trees with holes clean/
> through the trunk, where you can see out the other side./
> To what? Meg said. To other olive trees, I explained
> going to Delphi

And:

> the holes in the cheese contain the cheese[57]

But it remains that Kroetsch's aesthetic, offering only a minimal cosmology of deferred terror, expresses an alienation of a profound kind from which he seems unable to ransom himself. His discourse delivers neither himself nor his reader into a green world, but into one that is black with burnt-up meaning and consensual structures.

CONCLUSION

Cultural seismology--what James McFarlane and Malcolm Bradbury define as the attempt to record the shifts and displacements of sensibility that occur in the history of art and thought--is, as they point out, always a difficult and imprecise art. But, cautiously, they go on to distinguish three magnitudes of cultural change. There is, first of all, "those tremors of fashion that seem to come and go in rhythm with the changing generations" that can be measured in terms of decades; then, the "extended periods of style and sensibility" that can be most usefully measured in terms of centuries. Finally, they reserve the third category for those "overwhelming dislocations, those cataclysmic upheavals of culture, those fundamental convulsions of the creative human spirit that . . . leave great areas of the past in ruins. . . . question an entire civilization or culture".[1] This third category, which Bradbury and McFarlane claim for Modernism, is reserved for what is now being termed paradigm shifts.[2]

The uninvention of the world, although something of a novelty in the inventory of the poetic projects of the Canadian and Quebecois literatures, is, I believe, a project of the third magnitude whose history reaches at least as far back as the beginning of this century, to the era of the continental avant-garde. As I have tried to suggest in this thesis, most of the aesthetic postures and formal strategies germane to this project can be discerned in the theory and practice of Dada and the surrealists. Existing in a chronic state of extreme

existential tension, they perceived the nothingness and absurdity obscured by a tattered occidental palimpsest, and introduced corrosively entropic principles into their discourse in the hope of shedding the old world.[3] This understanding of the emptiness of the world, and, hence, of infinite human possibility, was for some avant-gardists (particularly Hugo Ball and André Breton), a kind of subversive gnosis that taught them how to turn the discourse and the Logos of the culture against itself. This parricidal discourse was gradually modified by the surrealists, who, demonstrating the fluid and dilatory nature of reality, sought to integrate the purely deconstructive and entropic practice of Dada within an ambitious project of conceptual regeneration. The residues of that project are still active in Nicole Brossard's discourse, and, in a more indirect and diffused manner, in Robert Kroetsch's work as well.

The second observation to be made is this: although the writings of Brossard and Kroetsch are predicated upon many of the same immediate premises (the fluidity of self and world, mandarin language, the necessity of a violent, centrifugal poetic, the espousal of disjunctive form and so on), that reject the notion of cosmology, they are both forced to posit a tentative, minimal cosmology. But the movement of mind finally expressed within these minimal cosmologies is strikingly different. Brossard's project, as it is found in her secondary texts and played out in her novels, is a highly articulated project of human migration; Kroetsch's project, crippled by nostalgia and internal contradictions, is a poetic of flight and defensive immanence which bears witness to a condition of extreme conceptual fatigue.

I can explain this difference only as a crucial and divergent movement of imagination. In Sartrean terms, it is as though Kroetsch's discourse is only able to negate the world; the second movement of the imagination, that of imaginatively re-positing the world, fails and collapses beneath the cover of nostalgia and farce and the desire to dwell phenomenologically because Kroetsch cannot conceive of a way of reformulating world in such a manner that it would not entrap. Necessarily, the intentional nature of the imagining consciousness is frustrated, and consciousness is forced back upon itself, into a chronic and entropic immanence. Put another way: Kroetsch's uninvention of the world, which cultivates the properties of language and imagination to dissolve the world in a kind of un-sedimentation of human thought, only allows the imagining consciousness to attain a boundary point of randomized equilibrium beyond which thought cannot proceed. If the human consciousness is to think or imagine "further", it must begin to move inward, centripetally.

The reasons that Brossard's discourse can move with a tidal alternation of centrifugal and centripetal pulses are, I believe, these: Brossard has freed herself from a "metaphysics of presence" and embraced relativity and the void in a manner that Kroetsch has, as yet, been unable to do; she has been able to integrate absence within an open, mutating cosmology that allows her access to an unbounded pool of energy and human possibility. The concept of potential female being acts as a hypothetical object which allows Brossard's imagination to move beyond old constructs of reality, and tentatively enact the second phase of imagining, the reformulation of world. In this way she is able to think beyond the conceptual fatigue that

cripples Kroetsch's project, and, drawing upon the radical epiphanies of the early avant-garde, she can begin to prepare to enact a staggering shift in consensual paradigms. Her project is sustained by what can only be seen as an ethos of female potential in a profoundly ontological sense. She is trying to cleanse collective perception, and teach the movement of the infinite within the finite, the constant circulation of imagination within reality. She is writing to deconstruct the apocalyptic devolution inscribed in our scriptures, our white-inked palimpsests. The consequences of the movements of mind described by these symptomatic discourses--these arias--are not to be ignored. This is how Pat Lowther put it in a note to her poetry two years before she was murdered:

> At one time I believed we humans were coming to the end of our evolutionary cycle--devolving like dandelions. Now I see the half-breeds of the future passing like migrating birds, and I begin to have a kind of tentative hope.[4]

Imagination is the grace of the soul.

NOTES

Chapter One

[1]The terms "English Canada" and "French Canada" are, of course, grossly inadequate terms that obscure the heterogeneous reality of the cultures and literatures found within arbitrary political boundaries. My use of them is a kind of shorthand for literature-in-English and francophone-literature-produced-in-Quebec.

[2]The era of Dupplessis is an obvious exception to this rule. See Denis Monière's Le développement des idéologies au Québec: des origines à nos jours (Montréal: Éditions Québec/Amérique, 1977) and Seraphin Marion's Les lettres canadiennes d'autrefois, vols. 1-9 (Hull: L'Éclair, 1939) for two instances of histories that emphasize the role of periods and conceptual tensions.

[3]For instance, many critics in Quebec have now taken to defining modernity in Quebec letters as occurring around 1970; in English-Canadian letters, the 'aura of modernity' is seen around 1959 (the year of Sheila Watson's Double Hook).

[4]Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, eds., Modernism: 1890-1930 (New York: Penguin, 1976; rpt. 1981), 393.

[5]This passage is found reformulated in the middle of an entry in Kroetsch's The Crow Journals. It reads:

> O Word of Eliot
> we cannot believe you
> O Principle of Causality
> we cannot believe you
> O Verisimilitude
> we cannot believe you
> O Depth & Profundity
> we cannot believe you
> O Epiphany of Joyce
> we cannot believe you
> (58)

[6]See Robert Scholes, Structuralism in Literature (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 183-90.

[7]It will soon be necessary, I think, to conduct a comparative study of the reception and utilization of poststructural thought in the Canadian/Quebecois literatures. The nature of that discourse, and the different proximities to its sources, are already resulting in disparate images in these literatures. See Barbara Godard's "Other

Fictions: Robert Kroetsch's Criticism" (Open Letter, 5, Nos. 8-9 [Summer-Fall 1984] [8]) where she observes the impact of translation (that is, the unavilability of crucial texts in English that round out the development and the nuances of given theoretical discourses) upon Kroetsch's use of crucial modern thinkers.

[8]Paul-Émile Borduas et al., Refus global (1947; rpt. Shawinigan: Éditions Anatole Brochu, 1971). All further references are found in the body of the text. For a short history of the Automatiste movement, see Guy Robert's Borduas (Québec: Les Presses de l'Université du Québec, 1972), 119-60.

[9]"Strange flowers" is Guy Robert's baudelairean phrase. See his Borduas, 119.

[10]Borduas, "Commentaires sur des mots courants", Refus global, 31. It is interesting to note that he refers to his painting as a kind of "writing".

[11]Karl Jasper's term is Grenzsituationen, which is sometimes also translated as "ultimate situations". See Charles F. Wallraff, Karl Jaspers: An Introduction to His Philosophy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 141-66. Some of these paradigmatic, insoluble situations that force an individual to the very edge of his frames of reference which Jaspers refers to: death, wonder, the problem of historicity, the impossibility of truth and so on. It is here, Jaspers writes, that man either "perceives nothingness or begins to sense true being" (32).

[12]Barney's letter to Stein, dated 16 December 1926, is quoted in Colette Betit et al., Mon héroine (Montréal: Éditions Remue-ménage, 1981), 34.

[13]Alienation is in fact one of the major themes of both Quebecois poetry and prose.

[14]Clement Moisan, La poésie des frontières: étude comparée des poésies canadienne et québécoise (Lasalle: HMH, 1979), 37-38. All further references to this text are found in the body of the work.

[15]In "Nicole Brossard: notes sur une écologie", La Nouvelle Barre du Jour, Nos. 118-19 (novembre 1982), Pierre Nepveu succinctly describes these communal myths as "une Histoire recommencée", "un Lieu fondateur" and "une Parole communautaire" (141).

[16]Gaston Miron, L'Homme rapaillé (Montréal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1970), 62.

[17]Paul Chamberland, Terre Québec (Montréal: Déom, 1964), 26.

[18]In "Death is a Happy Ending: a dialogue in thirteen parts" by Diane Bessai and Robert Kroetsch, collected in Figures in a Ground: Canadian Essays on Modern Literature Collected in Honour of Sheila Watson (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1978), 207.

[19]In boundary 2, 3, No. 1 (Fall 1974), 1.

[20]See his remarks passim in Labyrinths of Voice: Conversations with Robert Kroetsch entered in the subject-index under "Joseph Conrad". And in his study on Kroetsch, Peter Thomas observes that Conrad's ability to bring forward romantic quests and collapse them in failure and farce before great spatial images of sky and sea undoubtedly influenced Kroetsch's comic sensibility (98).

[21]Peter Thomas, Robert Kroetsch (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1980), 2.

[22]Louis K. MacKendrick, "Robert Kroetsch and the Modern Canadian Novel of Exhaustion", Essays in Canadian Writing, No. 11 (Summer 1978), 10.

[23]Quoted in MacKendrick, "Robert Kroetsch", 12.

[24]In Robert Kroetsch Thomas notes that Kroetsch's comedy is acutely attuned to the current of apocalyptic feeling found in a good deal of "neo-modernist" writing (98).

Chapter Two

[1]André Breton, "Introduction au discours sur le peu de réalité" in Point du jour (Paris: Gallimard, 1934), 25.

[2]Nicole Brossard and Roger Soublière, "Document Miron", La Barre du Jour No. 26 (octobre 1970), 3-6.

[3]Louky Bersianik, "Fieffée désirante", La Nouvelle Barre du Jour Nos. 118-19 (novembre 1982), 102-4.

[4]I have borrowed the terms "world" and "earth" from Dennis Lee's Savage Fields: An Essay in Literature and Cosmology (Toronto: Anansi, 1977).

[5]Nicole Brossard, L'Amèr ou le chapitre effrité (Montréal: Quinze, 1977), 18; Amantes (Montréal Quinze, 1980), 32.

[6]Excerpts taken from Jean-Paul Sartre, L'imaginaire, psychologie phénoménologique de l'imagination (Paris: Gallimard, 1940), 351-59.

[7]Nicole Brossard, "E muet mutant" in Double Impression: poèmes et textes (Ottawa: L'Hexagone, 1984), 65. For the sake of brevity, references to works collected in Double Impression will be found in the text when possible.

[8]Nicole Brossard, "L'épreuve de la modernité", La Nouvelle Barre du Jour Nos. 90-91 (mai 1980), 66.

[9]"E muet mutant", Double Impression, 66.

[10]Nicole Brossard, "De nos fictions", University of Ottawa Quarterly, 50, No. 1 (January-March 1980), 10.

[11]George Steiner, in his work Heidegger (Glasgow: Fontana, 1978), notes that for Heidegger, the "simple word, the antique vulgate will serve precisely as a "primal node of truth" precisely because it "contains the greatest charge of initial and valid perception" (32). Consequently, Heidegger's etymologies move back into language, and his view of language generally privileges the spoken word and blurs the distinction between speech and writing. The implications of this position will, I think, be made fairly clear by Brossard's position on nostalgia and writing.

[12]André Roy, "La fiction vive: entretien avec Nicole Brossard sur sa prose", Journal of Canadian Fiction Nos. 25-26 (1979), 33.

[13]Roy, "La fiction vive", 34.

[14]Behind Pound's notion of the artist as the antennae of the race lies Rimbaud's notion of the poet as voyant, as seer.

[15]Brossard, "L'épreuve de la modernité", 60.

[16]Nicole Brossard, "Naissance et dispersion du désir", Liberte, XIV, No. 6 (1972), 3-18.

[17]Brossard, "Naissance et dispersion", 21-22.

[18]Michel von Schendel and Jean Fisette, "Un livre à venir. Rencontre avec Nicole Brossard", Voix et Images, 3, No. 1 (septembre 1977), 3-18.

[19]See "L'épreuve de la modernité", 65. There Brossard writes of this "collective memory" and of a "sixth sense" that functions as a collective female survival mechanism. This sense appears to be the one associated with the idea of "re-vision"; and "re-vision" is in turn one element of the necessary movement of thought enacted in Brossard's Journal intime (Montréal: Les Herbes Rouges, 1984). This movement of thought is difficult to describe, but it is composed of two movements which cannot be separated from one another: a movement backward into the past (a critical re-vision of that past), then a speculative movement into the present and the zone of the potential. This movement repeats itself indefinitely.

[20]See Roland Barthes, Roland Barthes (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), 93-95 and passim.

[21]Brossard, "L'épreuve de la modernité", 66.

[22]Brossard, "L'épreuve de la modernité", 60-61. See also her Un livre (Montréal: Éditions du Jour, 1970; rpt. 1980) where she repeatedly rejects the idea of literature in favour of the idea of writing (e.g., "La chose écrite: morte. Le pouvoir de la mort, son pouvoir vertigineux" [40], and the reference to "la toile opaque de la littérature" descending over the book's agents [60]).

[23]"Cultural amnesia" is an idea found scattered throughout the essays of Hubert Aquin; see his Blocs erratiques (Montréal: Éditions Quinze, 1977). "Cultural insanity", in turn, is Dick Harrison's well-known phrase--see his "Cultural Insanity and Prairie Fiction" in Bessai and Jackel, Figures in a Ground, 278-94.

[24]Brossard, "L'épreuve de la modernité", 58.

[25]Roy, "La fiction vive", 34.

[26]Bernard Pingaud, "Midnight Novelists and Others", Yale French Studies No. 24 (Summer 1959), 18.

[27]Jean Ricardou, Le Nouveau roman (Paris: Seuil, 1973), 30-31.

[28]Alain Robbe-Grillet, Pour un nouveau roman (Paris: Gallimard, 1964). Paraphrase of his "On Several Obsolete Notions" found in For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction, trans. unknown (New York: Grove, 1965), 32.

[29]Michel Butor, Essais sur le roman (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 7. In her editorial introduction to Les stratégies du réel/ the story so far 6 (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1979), Brossard appropriates Butor's notion of writing as research, stating that the works found in the collection are écritures en recherche (8), the type of discourse she favours.

[30]Jean Ricardou, Pour une théorie du nouveau roman (Paris: Seuil, 1971), 28.

[31]Ricardou considers narrative as a machine whose efficacy is dependent upon its unobtrusive nature; hence, it is easily sabotaged by various tactics which reveal its artifice, "excess" or the "lack" of basic narrative components. If there are too few narrative elements, the narrative will deteriorate (le récit dégénéré); or, if there are too many narrative elements or they exist in a too-obvious formal structure, the narrative is "excessive" (le récit excessif).

Le récit abymé is the use of the device of mise en abyme to lay bare the artifice of the text. Le récit avarié is, literally, a narrative "damaged" by the inclusion of alternative versions of elements of the narrative which undermine the credibility of the ostensible narrative and damages the referential illusion. Le recit transmuté involves the generation of a narrative from an object (e.g., a postcard, poster, photograph) or a single image. Le récit enlisé is

literally a "stuck" narrative, one mired in the effects of "excessive" description or compulsive narratorial or authorial digressions. For further explanation, see Ricardou's Le Nouveau roman.

[32]Ann Jefferson, The Nouveau Roman and the Poetics of Fiction (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 23, 207-9. For further evidence of Brossard's use of the poetic of the Nouveau roman, see her two texts "Les surfaces", La Nouvelle Barre du Jour No. 81 (septembre 1979), 69-80, and "D'une surface", La Barre du Jour No. 25 (été 1970), 16-26.

[33]Olga Bernal, Alain Robbe-Grillet: le roman de l'absence (Paris: Gallimard, 1964). All further references to this work are cited in the text.

[34]Patricia Smart, Hubert Aquin, agent double (Montréal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1973), 10-11.

[35]Quoted in Smart, Hubert Aquin, 14.

[36]Brossard, "L'épreuve de la modernité", 61.

[37]Brossard, "L'épreuve de la modernité", 61-62.

[38]Quoted by Julia Kristeva in Desire in Language (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 31-32.

[39]Barbara Godard, "'Je est une autre': Nicole Brossard au Canada anglais", La Nouvelle Barre du Jour, Nos. 118-19 (novembre 1982), 151.

[40]Jacques Michon, "Surréalisme et modernité", Études Françaises, 11, No. 2 (mai 1975), 121-29.

[41]Arthur Cohen, "Antecedents and the Legacy of Dada Graphic Design" in Dada Spectrum: The Dialectics of Revolt (Madison: Coda Press, 1979), 72.

[42]Renato Poggioli, The Theory of the Avant-Garde, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (London: Harvard University Press, 1968; rpt. 1982).

[43]"L'existence est ailleurs" is the well-known phrase which concludes the first Manifesto of Surrealism.

[44]The German Expressionist movement is another paradigmatic instance of the artistic search for the redemption and the transformation of the world and the human spirit. In its initial, apolitical phase, Expressionism often characterized the struggle between the old world and elements seeking the creation of a new world in terms of a struggle between father and son. See Richard Shepherd's "German Expressionism" in Bradbury and McFarlane's Modernism: 1890-1930, 274-91.

[45]Quoted by Jean Marchand in Claude Gauvreau: poète et mythocrate (Montréal: VLB Editeur, 1979), 70.

[46]Antony Easthope, in Poetry as Discourse (London: Methuen, 1983), quotes another directive of Tzara's found in Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution in an English translation: "To dissolve the hard cement of an apparently impregnable fortress: syntax" (134). Surrealists were as acutely aware of the functions of syntax, and, as Jean Paulhan notes in "Syntaxe" (his contribution to the February 1920 issue of Proverbe), critics often mistook sabotaged syntax for an absence of syntax in surrealist texts.

[47]Paraphrase of a translation of the first Manifesto of Surrealism found in Manifestoes of Surrealism, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1972; rpt. 1982), 14.

[48]Ibid., 136-37. (This is taken from the Second Manifesto of Surrealism.)

[49]Nicole Brossard, "Me couler douce l'échine", La Barre du Jour No. 38 (hiver 1973), 30.

[50]Robert Short, "Dada and Surrealism" in Bradbury and McFarlane, Modernism: 1890-1930, 307.

[51]André Breton, "Revolver à cheveux blancs", G. Legrand, ed., Poésie & autre (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), 124.

[52]Adam Biro and René Passeron, eds., Dictionnaire général du surréalisme et de ses environs (Fribourg: Presses Universitaires de France, 1982), 215.

[53]Nicole Brossard, "Me couler douce l'échine", 30.

[54]Short, "Dada and Surrealism", 308.

[55]Nicole Brossard, "Préliminaires", La Barre du Jour No. 50 (hiver 1975), 7.

[56]Michel Sanouillet, "Dada: A Definition" in Dada Spectrum: The Dialectics of Revolt, 27.

[57]Quoted in Rudolf E. Kuenzli, "The Semiotics of Dada Poetry", Dada Spectrum, 57.

[58]Quoted in Kuenzli, "The Semiotics of Dada", 61-62.

[59]Quoted in Inez Hedges, Languages of Revolt: Dada and Surrealist Literature and Film (Durham: Duke University Press, 1983), 6. This play with the generative and the transmutational aspects of textual elements is something that suggests an area of affinity between elements of the French avant-garde and the Nouveau roman.

[60]Hedges, Languages of Revolt, 57.

[61]Barbara Godard, "The Avant-Garde in Canada: Open Letter and La Barre du Jour", Ellipse, 4, Nos. 23-24 (1979), 98-113.

[62]"Infra-language" is the term Barthes uses to describe the writing of Philippe Sollers in The Pleasure of the Text, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill & Wang, 1975), 7.

[63]Caroline Bayard, "Subversion is the Order of the Day", Essays on Canadian Writing Nos. 7-8 (Fall 1977), 19.

[64]Bayard, "Subversion", 19-20.

[65]Michon, "Surréalisme et modernité", 129.

[66]Michon, "Surréalisme et modernité", 127-28. It is precisely this belief in the possibility of the emergence of a new language out of the old one that Brossard shares with the surrealists. See André Beaudet's introduction to Sold-Out: étreinte/illustration (Montréal: Quinze, 1980), 7-13.

[67]Brossard, "L'épreuve de la modernité", 62.

[68]See Mary Daly, Gyn-Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), on ecstasy, spirals, spinning, energy, centring, escape, the female body as text, human evolution. See also Gregory Bateson, Steps to an Ecology of Mind (New York: Chandler, 1972), on the meaning of the spiral, holistic form, the relationship between information and evolution. For an introduction to Bateson, see John Brockman, ed., About Bateson (New York: Dutton, 1977).

[69]Nicole Brossard, Journal intime ou voilà donc un manuscrit (Montréal: Les Herbes Rouges, 1984), 9. In an interview with members of the Nouvelle Barre du Jour collective found in the special issue of that periodical devoted to Brossard's writing, she explains her use of the term "tri-dimensionnelle": "une conscience tri-dimensionnelle, c'est-à-dire qu'à un certain moment, . . . j'avais pour la première fois le sentiment d'avoir cette vision aérienne dont j'ai parlé dans d'autres écrits. Je voyais tout de suite l'effet sémantique, syntaxique, grammatical et sonore" (180-81). The survival of the sujet is then, I infer, necessarily in some sense synthetic or holistic.

[70]Jean-Paul Sartre, L'être et le néant: essai d'ontologie phenoménologique (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), 705.

[71]Pierre Nepveu, "Nicole Brossard: notes sur une écologie", La Nouvelle Barre du Jour Nos. 118-19 (novembre 1982), 140.

[72]Nepveu, "Nicole Brossard", 141.

[73]Nicole Brossard, Le sens apparent (Paris: Flammarion, 1980), 50.

[74]Arthur Rimbaud, Oeuvres, ed. S. Bernard (Paris: Garnier, 1960), 348.

[75]It is not accidental that so many women writers in Quebec are choosing to transcribe or incorporate graffiti into their texts. The more didactic of them use it as a form of sociological documentation and another channel of protest (e.g., Louky Berianik's Pique-nique sur l'acropole) while women like Yolande Villemaire and Nicole Brossard use it in a subversive manner; that is, like the Dadaists, they use it to subvert social discourse or contest it in a metasemiotic fashion.

[76]The two most important sources used in the writing of Amantes are Mary Daly's Gyn/Ecology and Djuna Barnes' Nightwood. There are intriguing intertextualities working just below the surfaces of this text, and perhaps the most compelling one is the spiracular cosmology (in Barnes, the spatial form) that conjoins all three texts.

[77]J. E. Cirlot, A Dictionary of Symbols, trans. Jack Sage (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962; rpt. 1983). All further references to this work are cited in the text. (It should be noted that in her Avant-poste interview with Caroline Bayard [Toronto: Porcépic, 1978] she mentions that she works a great deal with a dictionary of symbols [61].)

[78]François Charron, "Nicole Brossard: écrivain classique", La Nouvelle Barre du Jour Nos. 118-19 (novembre 1982), 73-74.

[79]Louise Dupré, "Les utopies du réel", La Nouvelle Barre du Jour Nos. 118-19 (novembre 1982), 83.

[80]Dupré, "Les utopies", 83-84.

[81]This mirroring is expressed in a number of near-metaphysical conceits found in Le centre blanc. One of the loveliest ones is found in "Le cortex exubérant": "brancher son cortex aux étoiles doubles--les rétines" (394).

[82]Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "On the Phenomenology of Language" in Signs, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Northwestern University Press, 1964; rpt. 1975), 91.

[83]Merleau-Ponty, "On the Phenomenology of Language", 91-92. Elements of this paraphrase taken from Barbara Godard, "Other Fictions: Robert Kroetsch's Criticism", Open Letter, Fifth Series, No. 8-9 (Summer-Fall 1984), 11.

[84]See Brossard's "L'avenir de la littérature québecoise: aux prises avec la réalité de dedans surgie", Études Françaises, 13, Nos. 3-4 (octobre 1977), 283-93, where she offers an analysis of how the Quiet Revolution prepared the way for a socialist and nationalist phase, which, in turn, facilitated the genesis of the feminist movement in Quebec. See the bibliography prepared by Fiona Strachan

in La Nouvelle Barre du Jour for the numerous, explicitly political texts written by Brossard and published in Le Devoir and the feminist periodical Têtes de Pioche.

Chapter Three

[1]Robert Kroetsch, "For Play and Entrance: The Contemporary Canadian Long Poem" in Robert Kroetsch: Essays, Open Letter, Fifth Series, No. 4 (Spring 1983), 103. All further references to this work are found in the text. The term Essays found in the body of the text and these notes refers to this special issue in which most of Kroetsch's critical writings are collected; it will be used here for the sake of brevity.

[2]Barbara Godard, "Other Fictions: Robert Kroetsch's Criticism", Open Letter, Fifth Series, Nos. 8-9 (Summer-Fall 1984), (9).

[3]Godard, "Other Fictions", 9.

[4]Donna Bennett, "Weathercock: The Directions of Report", Open Letter, Fifth Series, Nos. 8-9 (Summer-Fall 1984), 131.

[5]Robert Lecker, "Bordering On: Robert Kroetsch's Aesthetic", Journal of Canadian Studies, 17, No. 3 (1982), 124.

[6]Robert Kroetsch, "Beyond Nationalism: A Prologue", Essays, 84. All further references to this work are found in the text.

[7]Godard, "Other Fictions", 8.

[8]See Peter Thomas, Robert Kroetsch (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1980), 8, 121. (Thomas, with other critics, notes Kroetsch's "condensed sense of nation", "the slurring from 'Canadian' to 'Prairie'" that occurs in his discourse [117].)

[9]Erich Auerbach, Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953; rpt. 1974), 6. All further references to this work are found in the text.

[10]Russell Brown, "An Interview With Robert Kroetsch", University of Windsor Review, 7, No. 2 (Spring 1972), 8.

[11]Quoted by Peter Thomas, "Priapus in the Danse Macabre: The Novels of Robert Kroetsch", Canadian Literature 61 (Summer 1974), 55.

[12]Northrop Frye, The Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957; rpt. 1967), 43-44.

[13]Shirley Neuman, "Unearthing Language: An Interview With Rudy Wiebe and Robert Kroetsch" in A Voice in The Land: Essays By and About Rudy Wiebe, ed. W. J. Keith (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1981), 235. A careful reading of Kroetsch's novels dredges up a curious dynamic not unrelated to this bent towards apocalyptic structure in his discourse. There is often a conflation--a kind of unhealthy symbiosis --between the past and the present in his work, so that, as the past unravels toward its apocalypse, the present is carried along with it; almost as though the umbilical cord of a child, wrapped too tightly around the neck of the emerging child, ends by unintentionally strangling it. This is perhaps why Kroetsch's narrators and protagonists seem to exist in a destroyed present.

[14]Lecker, "Bordering On", 124-25.

[15]Geoff Hancock, "An Interview With Robert Kroetsch", Canadian Fiction Magazine Nos. 24-25 (1977), 40.

[16]Hancock, "An Interview", 40.

[17]Shirley Neuman and Robert Wilson, Labyrinths of Voice: Conversations With Robert Kroetsch (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1982), 7.

[18]Robert Kroetsch, The Crow Journals (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1982), 17.

[19]Robert Kroetsch, "Contemporary Standards in the Canadian Novel", Essays, 43.

[20]Robert Kroetsch, "On Being an Alberta Writer", Essays, 73.

[21]Robert Kroetsch, "The Canadian Writer and the American Literary Tradition", Essays, 13. The term "mandarin language" is first used in this essay (8) as far as I can ascertain.

[22]The earlier essay is "The Canadian Writer and the American Literary Tradition".

[23]The notion of the ego as a spent fiction is found in "Unhiding the Hidden: Recent Canadian Fiction", Essays, 21.

[24]The coyote mode of being is inextricably bound up with the figure of the Trickster in Kroetsch's discourse. See the two "Old Man Stories" contained in "On Being an Alberta Writer" (Essays, 71-74), the designation of Grove, Layton and Birney as tricksters of the English-Canadian literary tradition in "Unhiding the Hidden" (Essays, 20), and Kroetsch's remarks in Labyrinths of Voice (see the subject index under the headings "Coyote" and "Trickster").

[25]"Matte" is the term used by Barthes passim in The Pleasure of the Text and Roland Barthes to refer to phenomena that are pleasurable but utterly exempt from meaning in the conventional sense.

[26]Lecker, "Bordering On", 125.

[27]Lecker, "Bordering On", 128.

[28]See Robert Kroetsch, "The Continuing Poem", Essays, 81-82. All further references to this work are found in the text.

[29]Paul Radin, The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), ix. All further references to this work are found in the text.

[30]Joseph Campbell, The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology (Viking Press, 1959; rev. 1969; rpt. 1978), 273-76.

[31]See Labyrinths of Voice, 99.

[32]Robert Kroetsch, "The Exploding Porcupine: Violence of Form in English-Canadian Fiction", Essays, 57. All further references to this work are found in the text.

[33]Phrases taken from Kroetsch's dialogue with Bessai, "Death is a Happy Ending", Bessai and Jackel, Figures in a Ground, 206.

[34]The phrase is a translated version of Jean-François Lyotard's taken from his La condition post-moderne (Paris: Minuit, 1979), 31.

[35]Northrop Frye, Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology (New York: Harcourt & Brace, 1963), 17.

[36]Roland Barthes, Roland Barthes, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), 43.

[37]Neuman and Wilson, Labyrinths of Voice, 42.

[38]Johan Huizinga, Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955).

[39]Godard, "Other Fictions", 19.

[40]Godard, "Other Fictions", 20.

[41]This fear of conclusion and meaning is particularly acute in the poetry he has written to date; in his novels the protagonist is generally the bearer of this fear. In existential terms, I think, it would be described as a fear of transcendence. We could begin to observe here the manner in which the notion of text mirrors that of the self in Kroetsch's aesthetic, and the way that they both mirror his cosmology, his understanding of world.

[42]Robert Enright and Dennis Cooley, "Uncovering Our Dream World: An Interview With Robert Kroetsch", Essays on Canadian Writing Nos. 18-19 (Summer-Fall 1980), 24.

[43]The phrase is taken from Peter Thomas, "Priapus in The Danse", 60.

[44]Robert Kroetsch, Field Notes: The Collected Poetry of Robert Kroetsch, ed. Eli Mandel (Don Mills: General Publishing, 1981). Kroetsch has since published additional sections of the poem.

[45]Lecker, "Bordering On", 129.

[46]Lecker, "Bordering On", 129.

[47]Christopher Norris, Deconstruction: Theory and Practice (London: Methuen, 1982).

Walter J. Ong, Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word (London: Methuen, 1982). All further references to these works are found in the text.

[48]At least two critics have commented upon aspects of this impasse in Kroetsch's discourse. See Peter Thomas, Robert Kroetsch, where Thomas notes the existence of "a problem which has bothered Kroetsch from The Words of My Roaring onwards: the difficulty of reconciling his wish to render an authentic 'voice', grounded in place and the oral tradition of that place, with a radical concern with literary form itself" (116). See also E. D. Blodgett, "The Book, Its Discourse, and the Lyric: Notes on Robert Kroetsch's Field Notes", Open Letter, Fifth Series, Nos. 8-9 (Summer-Fall 1984), 195-205.

[49]See Jacques Derrida, "The White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy", New Literary History 6, No. 1 (1974), 11.

[50]See Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology, trans. Gayatria C. Spivak (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974; rpt. 1982).

[51]Quoted in Thomas, Robert Kroetsch, 17.

[52]Kroetsch is aware of this difficulty in his poetic. In conversation with Wilson and Neuman in Labyrinths, he speaks of it as a tension between the myth of Genesis and that of the Tower of Babel (116-19). He is apparently trying to effect a shift in his thinking by supplanting the notions of origin and naming with those of genealogy and "metynomic renaming", thereby avoiding the dangers of the centre, essence and meaning (see Bennett, "Directions of Report", 122, 134-35). These strategies are ones meant to avoid completion and semantic transcendance; Kroetsch's notion of metamorphosis is emphatically "lateral", chronically immanent (being a form of permutation rather than transformation), and itself verges on being an aporia. Since these strategies are not encountered in his novels, they will be laid aside.

[53]Robert Lecker, "Con/Texts of Desire: Robert Kroetsch's Alibi", Open Letter, Fifth Series, Nos. 8-9 (Summer-Fall 1984), 54.

[54]See also Peter Thomas, "Robert Kroetsch and Silence", Essays on Canadian Writing Nos. 18-19 (Summer-Fall 1980), 33-53.

[55]See Kroetsch's "For Play and Entrance: The Contemporary Canadian Long Poem", Essays, 91-110; "Carnival and Violence: A Meditation", Essays, 111-22; "The Continuing Poem", Essays, 81-82.

[56]This death-urge is not a consciously assumed being-toward-death, but an inchoate urge for anihilation and the dissolution of the self.

[57]Robert Kroetsch, "Delphi: a Commentary", Open Letter, Fifth Series, Nos. 8-9 (Summer-Fall 1984), 24, 27.

Conclusion

[1]Bradbury and McFarlane, Modernism: 1890-1930, 19.

[2]"Modernism" is an umbrella term in their work which allows them to lump together developments in the Anglo-American, Eurasian and European cultural traditions (including the various avant-garde movements of that epoch).

[3]The idea of shedding the old world is a common theme in a great deal of feminist discourse. See the work of Louky Bersianik (particularly her Les agénésies du vieux monde [Québec: L'Intégrale, 1982]), the work of the American poets Robin Morgan and Adrienne Rich, the poetry of the exiled Soviet poet Natalya Gorbanyevskaya, the prose of the German novelist Verena Stefan (her Shedding, trans. V. Moore and B. Weckmueller [New York: Daughters, 1978]).

[4]Quoted in 15 Canadian Poets Plus 5, ed. Gary Geddes and Phyllis Bruce (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1978), 394.

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